

FREESTONES MOVING THEIR JACKSON CO. POTTERY BUSINESS TO RHODE ISLAND

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Herald-Citizen Staff



Sally and Tom Freestone stand in their Jackson County studio, which they have recently sold. They will continue to make and sell their popular pottery in Rhode Island via online and at Gainesboro Drugs.

WHITLEYVILLE -- Tom and Sally Freestone have thrown their last pot in Whitleyville. After 22 years of sharing their world-renowned scripture pottery and 25-acre Jackson County studio and grounds with area residents, the Freestone Pottery owners are packing up their wheels and kilns and moving to Rhode Island, where the couple's family resides.

"While pausing briefly to look up from our work, we discovered that we had quietly grown older, had become 60-something and 80-something, respectively," said Sally. "Rather amazed at this, we realized that the time had come for us to relocate our pottery business to a spot nearer to family and grandchildren, back to our New England roots."

Tom said it took the couple three years to finally

decide to move.

"We began with the idea of buying a small vacation home in Rhode Island to be near Sally's children and grandchildren," he said. "The trips have become more and more frequent, and as I am now 85 years old, taking care of the business, our home and 25 acres is getting to be increasingly difficult. There's no way I can slow down; I slowed down a bit, but I can't slow down enough to do what I want to do," which includes writing his memoirs.

The couple have toured the nation to share their pottery mission at various craft fairs and shows, and they have been featured in many publications and on Tennessee Crossroads.

"We feel that both our talents and our lives, given to us by God, have been brought together through His grace, to allow us to do this work to His glory. Our commitment to each other, to our work, and to our God is clearly expressed in our stoneware," said Tom.

Though the Freestones may be moving, they certainly aren't quitting, and Freestone Pottery will continue to be available through the couple's Web site, www.freestonepottery.com, and at Gainesboro Drugs. The Freestones will also host an open studio pottery show all day Saturday and Sunday, June 28-29.

While Tom and Sally look forward to being closer to their loved ones, they acknowledge that leaving the Upper Cumberland has been a bittersweet proposition for them.

"Though we leave dear Tennessee and Kentucky friends behind, we will always hold them close in our hearts," said Sally. "It will be very sad to leave our hollow when we finally do, but it will be a joy to come home."

Added Tom, "I've enjoyed every minute of being in Jackson County. I have been accepted by the people and I shall miss them very much."

For directions to Freestone Pottery or more information about the open house, visit the Web site or call (931) 621-3456.

TOM'S BRIEF HISTORY OF FREESTONE POTTERY

Tucked away deep in a remote hollow in the beautiful hills of Jackson County, Tennessee, is a special place: Freestone Pottery. In 1986, Sally and I left Rhode Island and made our way to Tennessee, beginning a new life together in this place, full of peace and promise...



1985: We meet...

Sally, a Pennsylvanian by birth, had been an art teacher and a potter in New England since the early 1970s. I am an Englishman and an internationally known grist miller and mill consultant. I had owned and operated several mills in England since the 1950s. We met in Rhode Island in the spring of 1985. I had come to the United States on a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship to tour and study mills. It was at the end of my travels that Sally and I met, at an old mill site which housed her pottery shop.

...and find a Sanctuary

We were married in the early fall of 1985 and yearned to leave behind our complicated lifestyles. We began a pilgrimage toward a new, simpler way of living and found what we were looking for in the serenity of a valley near Whitleyville, Tennessee. There our modest pottery shop has grown into a thriving business and a cherished ministry.

Today: Busy...

Sally and I are equal partners in the production of our craft. The popularity of our stoneware has grown enormously over the years, mostly by word of mouth from delighted customers all over the United States and abroad. Sadly, no one in our families wishes to carry on our tradition, and as time goes on, we get better and better, but slower and slower, at what we do. We know that our pottery will become collectors' items in the future. Although we welcome both personalized and custom orders, the amount of pottery we make is limited. We want to keep our production small in order to maintain the high quality and special spirit that now pervades our work.

...and Joyful

We feel that both our talents and our lives, given to us by God, have been brought together through His grace, to allow us to do this work to His glory. Our commitment to each other, to our work, and to our God is clearly expressed in our stoneware.

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Photographs by Rovin Conover

Their story contains all of the makings for a novel such as "Swiss Family Robinson." Adventures. Challenges. And yes, romance.

Sally and Tom Freestone, while not shipwrecked in a hollow of Jackson County, perhaps seemed to feel just as isolated - and excited about the adventures ahead - when they moved to Whitleyville in search of a simpler life to share together.

"We needed something that was ours together," Sally, at right, says. "We (told our friends) we've got to find what we're supposed to do."

With faith in their God-given talents, teamwork and hope, they survived the challenges. Forging a new life together, in September 1986 they established Freestone Pottery.

Wheels of Miller and Potter Turn Together

Twelve years earlier, Sally and Tom hadn't even met. A native of Tisbury, England, Tom traveled throughout the southern portion of the country as a grist miller and mill consultant for 30 years. Recognized internationally for his mill work, he received several awards in recognition of his restoring to working order the Eling Tide Mill in Southampton. Also in recognition of his work, he received the prestigious Winston Churchill Traveling Fellowship Award. He took advantage of the fellowship to visit mills in the United States.

On this, his third trip to the States, he happened to visit a mill in Rhode Island that housed Nonquit Pottery. Its proprietress - Sally.

A former art teacher raised in in Chester County, Penn., Sally opened her shop in 1983 after a two-year apprenticeship in Newport. "I wanted to be a painter," she says. "But at 26, I discovered pottery and life has



never been the same." Sally and Tom were wed shortly after that meant-to-be meeting, and as their invitation says, their "wheels will turn together."

"I was looking for a mill, and Sally would do pottery," says Tom in a distinctive British accent.

Having no luck in finding a mill - "Now they are on sale everywhere," he says - Tom settled into managing a farm while Sally continued throwing pottery.

"I didn't want to get involved in pottery at all," he says. "I wanted to get into gardening, which I love, and woodworking."

Though they were happy, it didn't feel right. In 1986, after following up on an ad for the sale of a studio in a pottery magazine, the Freestones' search for simplicity and something to call theirs together ended. They were moving to Whitleyville.

In every good novel the protagonist must overcome obstacles, and the story of the Freestones is no different. Sally, accustomed to working in a small studio, found herself overwhelmed at first by a larger work space. Tom, at the age of 62, began to learn a whole new profession.

"She taught me how to glaze," Tom says as he dips a plate into the liquid Sally formulated.

"He's better than I am, and that's good," Sally says from across the room at her potter's wheel.

Tom's first try at turning clay on a wheel also was his last, he says. "One of the hardest things I ever did was put clay on top and turn the wheel," Tom says.

"He threw a bowl, and it's beautiful," Sally proudly interjects.

Instead, he uses "jigger" and "jolly" machines, which he made with parts from England, to produce all of the plates and large bowls.

Both also had to adjust to Southern customs such as unique phrases.

Tom, a natural storyteller, sets the scene: They had driven straight through to Tennessee from Rhode Island, stopping for dinner once they arrived.

"I took the bill to the lady behind the desk and paid and turned to leave. She said 'Y'all come back.' I thought, 'What happened I thought something was wrong and we needed to go back,'" Tom remembers with a chuckle.

Sally remembers that stop as her first encounter with Southern hospitality.

"I thought, 'They're faking this. How can they be so nice,'" she says. "I couldn't believe it."

One challenge remains ever-present: product imitation.

"Several potters have tried to copy us but they don't have our vision," Sally says. "Somehow, we do it best.

"If Tom and I hadn't joined forces, I don't think we'd be able to make the pieces," she says. "It's our two talents."

Peace in the Valley

Today, Sally and Tom's business thrives. Six days a week, from 6 a.m. until about 4 p.m., the whir from the spinning potter's wheel fills the Freestone Pottery studio. Also noticeable is the earth scent or clay - "The smell of creativity," - Sally calls it.

From plates and bowls to toothbrush holders and mirrors, these two members of the Tennessee Association of Craft Artists are proud to say every leadfree piece is hand-crafted and hand-painted one at a time.

"We run our business on electricity," Sally says. "It's the power from Upper Cumberland Electric Membership Corporation and the power of Jesus. We're connected to the power source in every way."

The attraction to Freestone Pottery is not only the craftsmanship, with its painted flowers in cobalt blue and green, but also the carvings on most of their pieces. They contain Bible verses. Sally began carving verses on pottery while going through a divorce in Rhode Island.

"As a way of therapy and praying, I put Bible verses on some pottery," she says.

It wasn't until they came to Tennessee that customers began asking for it.

"We're trying to illuminate the Bible for people, to decorate God's word," Sally says. "We're not trying to change it."

A dedicated marketer, Toms emphasizes the practicality of their pieces.

He explains how the mugs all have a place for the holder's thumb and how the handles are made so knuckles aren't burned. Pitchers are made specially so there is no drip from the lip. He also explains that the test of a good piece of pottery is checking to see if a knife cut leaves a mark in the glaze, indicating the glaze hasn't done its job. No mark will show on Freestone Pottery, Tom says.

"If you pay money for something, it should be useful and you shouldn't have to worry about it doing its job," he says. "We insist on quality; that's why we've been successful."

Sally agrees. "These are antiques of the future we are trying to make," she says.

With the help of one part-time apprentice, they make custom-ordered pieces and prepare stock for three shows. They display at two crafts shows at Prater's Mill in Dalton, Ga. (an upcoming show is Oct. 11 - 12) and have their own show at the Vanderbilt Holiday Inn in Nashville each May.

They limit their production numbers, not for fear that it wouldn't sell, but in order to maintain quality.

"We could quadruple our output and sell everything," says Tom, who finds time to consult on mills and to garden.

The word carries. Freestone handmade pieces grace homes from the Americas to Europe and Australia. Not even language is a barrier; they've fulfilled special requests for verses in Russian and French.

In establishing Freestone Pottery, Sally and Tom found that special something to call their own.

"If you're happy with your job, happy with your spouse and happy where you're living, who needs anything else." Tom says

"I think we're supposed to be here," Sally says. "It's been a wonderful way to start a brand new life together. The Swiss Family Robinson reminds me so much of this situation, only we're the English Family Freestone."

<http://www.ajlambert.com>