

Jim Rowe, Cambridge Stoneware Co.

Background: Jim Rowe is the former owner of Rowe Pottery and currently the proprietor of Cambridge Stoneware Co. in Cambridge, WI, a village known for its artisans.

A graduate of ceramics and art history at UW-Whitewater, Rowe explained the world of ceramics: from the hands-on aspects of throwing the pots; to marketing his business during a nationwide trend in arts and crafts decorating; to eventually selling his original company and starting a new one.

Q: Where did you get the idea to start Rowe Pottery?

It came from college, when I was an art student at UW-Whitewater. I majored in ceramics and art history.

After college, I became a potter and worked for a few years. I ended up in Cambridge at an old blacksmith shop and started throwing pots as a one-person studio.

It was perfect for what we were doing, which was called making salt glaze pottery. Don Reitz at UW-Madison was pretty much responsible for the renaissance in making salt glaze pots. That was a historic pottery form. Back in the 1800's, pots were being made and used at that point in time because there was no refrigerator, there was no Ball jar – that's how we stored foods – so it's a historic process.

Salt-glazed pots fit into the country decoration mode that was so popular in the 70's and 80's. Nobody in the rest of the country was doing it. I saw that these old pieces were a decorator item for that country movement. So, I'm thinking, "Gee whiz, I can do that."

It took me two years to do it. I developed a line of 12 pieces and went to a wholesale show in Chicago. I found a representative and took a couple of samples and I had a catalogue printed up. This rep was out of New York and she jumped on the product line and in three weeks, she sold out our production for the year.

That was the start of it. On every pot, we put a stamp that said, "Rowe Pottery Works, Cambridge, WI." We would sell thousands of pots a month and they went all over the place.

What was it like to sell your name with the company? Was it easy or hard?

It was easier than you think. The circumstances around selling the business were kind of unusual. I sold it to somebody who had a lot of enthusiasm to take over the business and grow it. We did need some marketing funds and we were really going to grow the business. But, he kind of lost interest very quickly and had enough assets that he could pick and choose from many different opportunities. He chose to liquidate the company.

So there is no more Rowe Pottery?

When he liquidated it, there were a couple people who were bidding for the business to purchase it. I was one of them trying to purchase it, and somebody else decided to pay more than I could afford. I maintained the ownership of the store building. The factory building where we produced everything was sold.

What role did re-routing the traffic have on the business in Cambridge? (There was a major construction project in Cambridge in the past few years.)

That was a rugged time. It was two of three years. We had one year of construction, then we had a year of recovery and then we had another year of construction.

It seemed like a lot of business changed hands in that period of time....

There were a lot of things going on. It started in 1999. Then we went through the 2000 thing with the stock market, and then 2001... we had everything going on politically with terrorism and everything else.

How's Cambridge today?

Great. It's really come around. In that period of time, the reason for the closing was that they were re-doing the main street, so the amenities and the street are pretty charming. Cambridge has always been an interesting little town because you can stop, park your car and enjoy the Village of Cambridge and really only have to walk two blocks.

This is an excerpt taken from an interview aired on WTDY AM Radio. Want to hear more? All "IN BUSINESS with Jody & Joan" podcasts are posted at Madison1670.com.