

China Hall: A Home-Grown Family Firm

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Charleston knows the scenario well: It's a home-grown family firm that stresses soft-sell. It exerts a stabilizing and image-enhancing influence on the area.

The proper name of the corporation is China Hall, the Charles-ton Crockery Co. Generations of Charlestonians have called it China Hall. It had its origins in 1813, but in 1896 Paul W. Sanders Jr. purchased the store. It's been in the family since.

The current owners are Mrs. Rutherford S. Green, Sanders' daughter, her husband, and her son. The store is located at 306 King St.

China Hall is the oldest direct dealer in the country of Johnson Brothers earthen ware from England. The store brought in its first Johnson Brothers white-ware the year of its founding.

The British influence is still important in the store's dinner-ware offerings. Johnson Brothers remains a leading line, but dinnerware from many other countries than England is featured, ranging from Pickard china to Haviland from France and Noritake from Japan. The store also features a large selection of gift items, including bowls, urns, figurines and the like. Also in the assortment are pieces from Hummel, Wedgewood and Leflon.

"Father came into the business when he was 16. He formed a corporation called Charleston

Crockery, then bought out China Hall," Mrs. Green says. "The business has always been dinnerware. China originally was sold only in sets of 12. If you broke a piece you couldn't replace it. The store has been compared to stores in Europe and Nassau. I don't know of another real china store in the United States."

The store has been in the same location since 1946. That move in itself was traumatic.

"We were real scared at that time. For some reason everything of any significance was on the west side of the street. The store has been through earthquakes, hurricanes and tidal waves," Mrs. Green says. "There have been a lot of changes over the years."

"Before the war (World War II) drummers or salesmen would set up shop in a hotel," says Rutherford Sr. "Salesmen would bring in a plate with different borders. The selection was very small. The Japanese were responsible for bringing in mixed sets because they sold extra

too many. The Greens had a good idea of the invisible market. Inflation got no good in the area, the

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cup. "Nowadays you go to various shows to look at merchandise. Salesmen have fairs... In a few years there won't be salesmen because people don't like to travel and because of the high cost of travel."

Over the years the Greens have found that the personal touch pays off handsomely.

"We try to keep business low key," Mrs. Green says. "We greet the persons when they come in to the store. I don't like a clerk hanging all over me. We stress the personal touch. We had one man, a tourist, resent it. He said, 'I don't like being greeted.' Other than the disgruntled

tourist, the Greens do quite well with out-of-towners. They even have an autograph book for them to sign.

"We have people from Savannah, Charlotte, Greenville and Columbia who come to do business with us," Mrs. Green says. "They say they have malls in their towns but they don't have specialty shops. Specialty shops run King Street."

And the Greens are big on King Street. They think the individuality of the specialty shops and the quaintness of Charleston are two big pluses in their favor.

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bring into the area, the more people you get."

Inflation, the invisible money robber, has given the Greens fits too.

"We're in the type of business that's hit first. People have to buy groceries. Dressmakers can change the style of their clothes and raise their prices without criticism," Mrs. Green says.

Rutherford Sr. says it differently. "I remember when a line that sold for 35 cents went to 55 cents. I said 'It'll never sell.' Now it's selling for \$10."

I asked the Greens if they had considered using the highly touted phrase: "Buy it because it's a hedge against inflation." They don't.

"I don't tell people to buy it because of this or that," Rutherford Sr. says. "I tell people to buy it if they like it."

The family not only impresses the casual shopper but co-workers as well.

"When we hire people they stay with us," Mrs. Green says. "We've never lost a person to another job."