

Crafting a Showplace From a Chicken Coop

By MARILYN FRANKEL

MOODUS

THE three Simon boys had grown up on the farm here, but after going to college they had no interest in the family poultry and egg business. Instead of moving away, though, they came home weekends and helped Joyce and Max Simon build a now-thriving craft shop in one of the old wooden coops. Known as Down on the Farm Ltd., the family-run shop recently opened for its fourth season after its usual winter closing.

The small farm that the Simons started 35 years ago has grown to 62 acres, with the chickens in modern concrete facilities. Though their sons are not interested in the poultry business, the whole family wants to keep the land intact.

It was the specialties of the sons — Ken's promotional expertise, Paul's business planning and Andrew's design abilities — that made the shop idea come alive. "The only way we could have done this was with the resources right in the family," said Andrew, now 28 years old, who is given credit for having started the whole thing.

"I knew farming wasn't for me and that the egg business wasn't going anywhere," he said. His father nodded agreement. "In this business you have to be a giant or a gentleman farmer and I'm neither," Max said. "We've never encouraged our sons to stay on the farm."

"But none of us wanted to give up our roots here," said Andrew, "and when everyone liked the craft shop idea I started the plans and did the cabinet work in the basement of the house."

He had studied architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design, but dropped out when he realized he wanted to "make a living without joining the rat race." His older brother, Ken, now 32, had graduated from college and was living in Fairfield when Andrew joined him. About then Andrew realized he was interested in designing furniture, and Ken bought him his first set of tools. "He encouraged me and made me a deal," said Andrew. "He said he'd look after me if I'd make him some furniture." That got Andrew started.

It is Andrew Simon's work that the visitor first admires when entering Down on the Farm. Rough wood, wide windows and open space mark the interior, with nothing to indicate that it had been a two-story chicken coop.

"Max is a pack rat, and we recycled as much as we could of what he'd kept," Andrew continued. "There were old floor boards that I thought would be great buried under eight inches of

chicken manure. So we started scraping and found that chickens have the same weathering effect on wood that the ocean does. Now the boards look handsome made into display units and shelves."

Besides designing the shop and building all the display units, Andrew Simon's prototypes of his wall units, step stools, dining room sets and nests of tables are on view. He commutes between his workshop apartment at the far end of the coop and Manhattan, where he redesigns loft spaces. He described his work as "contemporary eclectic environment" created according to each client's needs. "I didn't start out as a carpenter," Andrew re-

called. "In fact, I flunked shop in high school."

Paul, the youngest Simon, who died two and a half years ago, was a pre-law student majoring in political science when the shop concept began. He studied the East Haddam-Moodus traffic patterns, tourist attractions, area resources and population trends and got letters of encouragement from government agencies and officials in order to convince the banks that a craft shop in a chicken coop was a viable enterprise. "He was the brains of the organization," said Andrew.

Ken, a journalist, is responsible for administration, advertising and promotion. Mrs. Simon does most of

the buying, with Andrew and Ken going along to craft shows too when they can. Laverne Barile is shop manager and also does some of the buying.

Mr. Simon pops in and out, occasionally bestowing cartons of fresh eggs on surprised customers. He has been fulfilling his own dream by running a wholesale bakery in the coop between the shop and Andrew's workshop.

The Simons have done a great deal of thinking and talking about the kind of crafts they carry. "Crafts can't be marketed like a new line of clothes or soap," said Ken, "and we knew we'd have to have a point of view when we made our selection."

"We examined why people buy crafts

and decided it was to offset big business — to go counter to the high technology of our time," said Andrew. "The crafts have expanded and don't have that 'homemade' look anymore. The line between art and crafts has blurred. The artistic items are the ones we want to sell."

"Look at the range in pottery," said Mrs. Simon, with a sweep of her arm that took in the shop's two levels. "It's no longer just the earth tones. There's pottery to suit every taste, and we carry work done in all styles, even formal approaches worked in porcelain. One woman came in wanting handmade pottery that would fit in her French Provincial-style house. That's

the pottery customer one met a few years back. Today's well-made crafts are tomorrow's antiques."

"Customers are interested in the craftsmen, and they want to know who made the items they're buying. About 95 percent of our things are signed," said Andrew.

Prices at Down on the Farm range from under a dollar for paper goods to hundreds of dollars for furniture, sets of pottery and glass.

Some of the most interesting work in the shop has come from local artists who heard about the shop in the chicken coop and dropped in with samples to show, though craftspeople are encouraged to make appointments.

Approximately 300 artists are represented in the shop, 90 percent of them from New England, about 30 to 40 percent from Connecticut. "We wish it were even more local," said Mrs. Simon, "but that's how it's worked out in terms of people who meet our standards."

Connecticut crafts are highlighted every summer. Among the state artisans whose work is regularly seen at Down on the Farm are Lois Eldridge, Aldo Passarelli, Barbara Scioscia, Adele Firshein and Evelyn Foster, pottery; Mary Wolff, Marion Smart and Catherine Powell, batik and fabric art; Robert Zarcone, leather; Sally and Bill Richards, pewter; Ruth Rickard and Jane Crowley, stained glass; Audrey Meyers, stuffed toys; Claire Boiano, feather jewelry and mirrors; Rich Miller, art glass; Karen McDermott, figural trapunto quilted wall hangings and mobiles; Charles Duncan, silver jewelry; Kari Lonning, baskets, and Nancy Wotyna, custom silver and stone jewelry.

On a lower level of the old coop, with its own entrance, Evelyn Foster teaches pottery, and across the parking area in a second old coop a crafts workshop is getting under way. So far an art glass studio, run by Roger Gandelman and David Boutin, occupies one end of that coop. Visitors are welcome to stop in, and both young men seem delighted to be interrupted to explain how they work. Their wares are sold in the shop, and other craftspeople are expected to use spaces in that second coop.

Down on the Farm is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 11 to 5; it is also open on holiday Mondays. The phone is 873-9905.

While Down on the Farm is off in the country, it's not exactly out of the way. It's up the road from the Goodspeed Opera House: about six miles north on Route 149 from East Haddam Center to the Mobil station just before Moodus Center, left at the light following Down on the Farm signs to the shop on Banner Road, opposite the Banner Lodge golf course.



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Joan, Max, right, and Andrew Simon of Down on the Farm Ltd., the craft center and chicken farm in Moodus