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Handmade, jeweled collars from Virginville resident give Fido the classy, upscale look

By Michelle E. Arevalo
Reading Eagle correspondent

In 2005, Virginville resident Mary E. Oswald took a momentous trip to England.

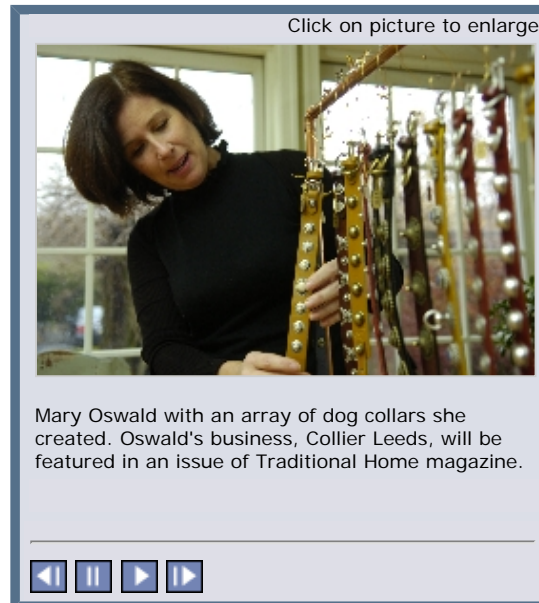
Unlike her previous trips there, this trip took her to Leeds Castle in Kent, where she was struck by inspiration.

"I lived in England in the 1980s and have been there many times, but had never been to the castle," said Oswald, 46. "A friend and I toured it, and I was surprised to find a dog collar museum. The collars were so impressive. I've been a lifelong dog lover and owner and have always wanted something like this for my own dogs, so the idea stuck with me."

She returned home and began to research and teach herself the art of making leather collars.

She also drew on her professional experience in marketing creative wares such as antiques and jewelry. With her first completed collar, her business - Collier Leeds - was launched.

"Collier is French for collar and Leeds is a play on words," she said. "It stands for the castle and also leads - or leashes."



Mary Oswald with an array of dog collars she created. Oswald's business, Collier Leeds, will be featured in an issue of Traditional Home magazine.

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Her handmade creations are luxurious, rugged and functional, and nothing like typical nylon or leather collars.

The handmade in the USA label is important if Oswald gets her wish to supply one soon-to-be-famous canine with a Collier Leeds collar and leash set.

"I'd like to make one for the puppy that will soon live in the White House," she said. "As soon as the breed is announced, I'm going to make and send a set to the Obama family."

Seeing one of her collars on a presidential pup is not outside the realm of possibility for Oswald, whose Collier Leeds designs will be featured in an upcoming issue of the nationally distributed home decor magazine, Traditional Home. There has also been interest from the famous New York City-based department store chain, Saks Fifth Avenue.

Although Oswald honors the historic collars that inspired Collier Leeds, she invents her own designs and names them for real, adored dogs.

"I name them for dogs I've had, or those of friends and family," she said. "I use real names and nicknames. People always have nicknames for their dogs. I know I do. For example, Lizzie is the name of my Airedale-mix but I also call her "Lippy," there are collars with both those names."

The collars have been tested for comfort, durability and style by Lizzie and Oswald's beloved Bichon Frise, Louis.

"They're country dogs," she said. "They run through the mud and fields around our house and come in messy. I hand-wash the collars in hot water and they're as good as new again."

Collier Leeds' designs are made from high-grade latigo and English bridle-quality leather, which Oswald cuts, stamps and finishes herself. The adornments resemble their antique counterparts, down to every semi-precious stone, metal spike and brass buckle.

"Like every other component, I set the stones by hand," she said. "The spikes are ornamental on my collars but represent collars worn by hunting dogs as protection years ago. The buckles are reproductions of ancient ones. There is one that is a replica of a Roman military buckle and another is in the Byzantine style."

Oswald said such things are very exciting for her, especially since she took many years off from the working world to stay home and raise her daughters, Emma and Claire, who are in college.

Oswald runs every aspect of the business alone, from her two home studios - one for leather craft and one for designing - designed for her by her husband, Kurt.

"I've always wanted my own business but never dreamed this would be the one I'd have," she said. "Yet it combines so many things that are important to me - like dogs - and goes with my aesthetic vision. It really is a labor of love."

Collier Leeds

Owner: Mary E. Oswald

Address: P.O. Box 10, Virginville

Phone: 610-349-5460

Web site: www.collierleeds.com

Info: Offers dog collars fashioned after historic collars worn by European dogs of the past. The collars are handcrafted in saddle-quality leather and decorated with antique metal fittings and semiprecious stones. The 14 styles may be custom-sized by submitting a dog's measurements. The collars are sold in standard pet sizes.

Orders are taken via the Web site. The collars, which range in price from \$45 to \$125, are sold locally at The Bark On Main, Kutztown, and will be in stock at the GoggleWorks gift shop through the holidays. Boutiques in Charleston, S.C. and the greater Chicago area also sell the collars. Collier Leeds is slated for inclusion in an upcoming issue of Traditional Home magazine.

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