

# Fall guy's business holds water

*Foam-model, faux cascades soothing — and cheaper*

By LISA PETRILLO, Staff Writer

**S**AN MARCOS — Considering the centuries it took to create a wonder like Yosemite Falls, you've got to hand it to Dennis Lowrie, who can make his waterfalls in four seconds.

Lowrie also has one up on Victoria Falls, which is permanently featured in Africa. His foam-model, faux falls are totally portable.

His average waterfall weighs less than the typical third-grader. They can go indoors and out; you just plug them in.

And faux falls are available on credit through his San Marcos store, Waterfalls and Oases — a place that could exist only in Southern California.

Niagara may be more spectacular, but it's certainly not as versatile.

"It's a little piece of paradise" is the way satisfied waterfall owner Bill Browning described his larger-than-average, 20-foot-tall, \$12,000 foam falls gurgling in his back yard at Elfin Forest.

Lowrie has carved himself a lucrative niche in the personal waterfall market, getting what he says are 100 customers a day in his store.

And while competitor Ed Wilus admires the product, he is one of the handful of local fallmakers and pond builders who remain committed to the real thing — rock.

To Wilus, creating custom water features is more than just landscaping; it's a crusade. The appeal is a natural source of relaxation — he sees water as nature's Valium.

Plus, Wilus said, "I saw that society was plowing up all the natural habitat so fast for development."

He likes to think his real-rock backyard ponds and falls offer displaced ecosystems an alternate, albeit man-made, home. Sort of eco-condos.

But when it comes to money, Lowrie's system

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Union-Tribune photo / CHARLIE NEUMAN

**Faux falls:** Dennis Lowrie of San Marcos builds what one customer terms "a little piece of paradise" — faux waterfalls.

# Currents

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## Falls

Artificial cascades light-weight, low-cost

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allows personal waterfalls for the masses, as Don Sanchez of Poway discovered when he got an \$80,000 bid for building his backyard waterfall fantasy landscape project out of real rock.

Instead, Sanchez, a retired General Dynamics manager, is quite pleased with the under-\$15,000 faux falls he installed next to his spa. And with his self-contained electric unit, he pointed out, "There's no upkeep or maintenance."

Indeed, why make waterfalls out of rock and mountainsides? Lowrie considers this an odd question.

"You can't get these designs in rock," Lowrie said.

Certainly nothing like his falls exists in nature. And then, of course, rocks are notoriously disobedient, having the annoying tendency to erode and avalanche.

He patted one of the 4-foot-high, under-\$600 models displayed in his showroom, which is accented with fake greenery.

"These are more durable than rock," Lowrie contends. "Real rock will leak after an earthquake."

### Zeal for inventing

Although Lowrie is professionally licensed to fit hearing aids, it was his zeal for inventing that brought him to the secret chemical recipe for the mock-rock compound.

That was almost four years ago, before Lowrie quit his day job. He first started selling his falls at the Del Mar Fair. Encouraged by the response, the family opened the shop off Nordahl Road last summer.

The oasismaking is done by his sons and partners, Jon and Michael, who have to work fast because the foam compound becomes as hard as a pine tree in about four seconds.

One satisfied customer is the Carlsbad Police Officers' Association, which installed a small, portable waterfall — it had to be fitted through the door of the police complex — as a memorial to slain officers.

"We looked at plaques, and then we decided to go this way," Sgt. Don Metcalf explained. "Moving water (is) always a sign of life."

### As real as real

Teresa Smith finds that her oasis

was an inexpensive and instant way to remind her of the falls and ponds of her Southern childhood. And at the same time, the oasis, which she keeps in her atrium, completes the look in the Lake Hodges home she classifies as a cross between a ski lodge and the Ponderosa.

"I just put plants all around it," Smith said. "It's as real as real can get."

She prefers the foam model because real rock could pose a danger to her wandering toddler — although even domesticated nature isn't kid-proof, she explained: "My 2-year-old drowned three wireless phones in one week in the waterfall."

Lowrie's customers run from apartment residents to moneyed quasi-celebrities such as Browning, co-owner of the popular No Fear surf-wear line.

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DENNIS LOWRIE

With his company expecting a \$200 million gross in its first five years, Browning could afford to buy a big chunk of some tropical island somewhere with his own private, and real, waterfalls.

So why did Browning go with the faux falls?

"I like it here," he said of his Escondido-area home, where he can get to the mountains, ocean or desert quickly.

Plus, Browning pointed out, his large waterfall is far more convenient than the real thing, which tends to be inaccessible, expensive to visit and more than a little dangerous to clamber about.

"I can jump all over it," he said, without worrying about scrapes and cuts from jagged edges.

There are more civilized advantages of flat ledges, too.

"You can sit in the pools and set your drinks on the rocks," Browning said.