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More than meets the eye at Marine Supply and Hardware
Anacortes' oldest business is haven for 'strange and weird' items



Owner Steve Demopoulos stands proudly in the store started by his grandfather Efthemios (Mike) Demopoulos.

By Amanda Baltazar

Rick Sohn is the new guy at Marine Supply and Hardware in Anacortes, since he's only been there for 21 years.

But Sohn seems to be as much a fixture at this store as anything else in it. An emporium of everything, with a focus on marine supplies and shelf after shelf of hardware of every shape and size, the store is also stuffed with knowledgeable employees who blend right in.

Historic community fixture

Marine Supply and Hardware has been an Anacortes fixture since 1910, when Greek immigrant Efthemios (Mike) Demopoulos opened it, to take advantage of a nascent fishing industry in the town.

Demopoulos had worked his way up to this point. He arrived on the East Coast



At the northern end of Anacortes, Marine Supply and Hardware is the town's oldest business.

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from Greece in 1906 at the age of 17 and then made his way to Portland, Ore., where he took a job in a restaurant. Deciding after a while that the hospitality industry wasn't for him, he headed north to work in the labor camps, and then to Anacortes.

Here he set to work as a self-employed junk collector, storing his finds in a wheelbarrow and gradually working his way up to a cart, a horse, a truck and then the store.

"He would collect the junk wherever he could and then trade and sell it," said Sohn, the store's buyer. Demopoulos worked every day and ran the business here for 62 years, and didn't even close the store during the Depression when every store around him shut down. There were even times when he couldn't afford any employees, said Sohn, so he'd just keep the door locked and answer it himself when there were customers.

It was a love of business that kept Marine Hardware going. "[Demopoulos] was not into fishing; he was into working," said Sohn. And the store's owner exhibited that very spirit up until the end, working until just six months before he died in 1981, when he was too sick to get into the store.

Marine Supply and Hardware is now the oldest marine store in the United States and the oldest store in Anacortes. The building that houses it (now owned by the Demopoulos family) is the largest set of contiguous buildings in Washington and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The business has barely changed since it opened, pointed out Sohn. "We look pretty much as we did in 1931," he said, pointing to the store's cat, an animal that's been a fixture, although not the same one for all these years. The previous cat became so famous that people stopped by just to see her.

Changing times

Business has changed, though, and the store has switched from being a supplier for commercial fishing and industrial business such as the mills and refineries.

"Up through the '70s and '80s there were substantial fishing fleets [in Anacortes]," said Sohn. "We had 30 to 50 fishing accounts who'd be in here regularly, but now we don't even have half a dozen."

Nowadays business is largely tourism, he said, and because of this, antiques were added both to the inventory and the window signage, to draw more people in. A lot of the antique merchandise is also strategically placed up front to attract tourists; boaters know what they need and can see past these items.

"But we still do a lot of business with pleasure boaters who need a part, and we still work with the extremely limited commercial fishing supply that there is," he said. Other business comes from marine construction and the America's Cup team from New Zealand, which is working in Anacortes.

Because the business has become so reliant upon tourism, Marine Supply is much busier in the summer. There are not even any fishermen around, said Sohn, since by the time the good weather arrives they've already headed to Alaska.

Even an old standby like this store has been hit by the recent downturn in the economy, and Sohn has certainly noticed fewer visitors coming through the doors. On the bright side, he said he's seen more local, Washington, traffic.

Find it, whatever "it" is, here

And what are these people looking for? Everything, said Sohn – books, housewares, old coffee pots, old tools (to use or just to have). The only thing the store doesn't carry is electronics. "We try to keep ourselves different, without eye-catching things," he explained, adding that the store buys, sells and trades.

Locals also use the store for hardware, but it tends to be as a last resort, he said. First they visit Ace Hardware and Sebo's, which are located near one another, and if they can't find what they're looking for, they then think of Marine Supply, at the very northern end of town.

"If people get stumped on something, they come here," said Steve Demopoulos, Mike's grandson, who now co-owns the store with his father, Themo. "That's

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basically what we do – we’re the store people come to if they can’t find something. “People are lazy and start at the other end of town and then work their way down here. You get the people looking for the strange and the weird, and that’s what we carry.” Because of their ability to supply seemingly elusive items, Demopoulos explains that he has a very loyal following.

Steve Demopoulos took over the family business in 1981, once his grandfather died. Upon his death, Steve and his father purchased the business, and that’s when the third generation Demopoulos gave up his job on the ferries to return to the family fold. And Themo can still be found many days in the store, although he largely takes care of the store’s accounts now.

There’s also a pretty strong mail order business, although people can’t order online. The store’s Web site (www.marinesupplyandhardware.com) lists their merchandise, and customers can call in orders. Cross-country shipping is not an irregular occurrence.

Oddly, popular items to ship are tuna and coffee. The coffee is roasted in-house – Bolivian Organic Decaffeinated or Mariner’s Roast Sumatra. The coffee machine itself seems like a store fixture, although it’s only been there for 10 years. Local Anacortes customers call in coffee orders and come and pick it up 20 minutes later – the time it takes to turn green beans into roasted and ground coffee. Local restaurant Mary Ann’s also carries the java.

“It may not look like it, but there’s a lot of stuff we don’t carry,” said Demopoulos. “But we can order it and get it in 24 or 48 hours.” His five employees are also old-timers enough that they can typically put their hands on something that a customer would never find.

In addition to its merchandise, Marine Supply and Hardware also offers expertise. This ranges from custom rope splicing to repairs on old kerosene lamps or stoves. “People don’t do this much any more,” said Sohn, “but we can offer advice, parts and books.”

The big thing that has changed about Marine Supply and Hardware since it opened is its size. The original store was about a quarter of the size of today’s store, which totals around 5,000 square feet. The store simply expanded almost organically until the original Demopoulos eventually owned the entire block. And now the Demopoulos family owns so much more than that – history, tradition and the best collection of marine supply and hardware in the Pacific Northwest.

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