

Editors Note: This is the first in a series of articles about trapping supply and lure dealers in Ohio. Each issue we are going to feature a different supply and lure dealer from Ohio and continue this until all are represented. Please be patient as this is going to take some issues to get through. We hope you enjoy their stories.

Northern Sport Company

“I started trapping muskrats with my cousin, Ray Toth, when I was just a boy”, said Ed Molnar Sr. “His father, Uncle John Toth, was my mentor. I guess it all started from there. We trapped ditches around close to home for several years, and then expanded as we got older and could drive. Eventually we made a deal with a fur buyer named Carl Wheeler at Sandusky, to trap his marsh. He kept 40% and we split the other 60%. That was a great deal for us back then. We spent a lot of time at his place helping grade and bag rats for the big New York dealers that came to buy.”

Ed Sr. was learning the fur business without even intending to. Meanwhile, between trapping seasons, he worked as a painting contractor, married his wife Marge, and started a family. All were important events that lead to the current success of Northern Sport Co. “Before the 1959 fur season, Carl came to me and asked if I would buy fur for him”, said Ed Sr. “With my seasonal painting business at a low in the winter, and bills to pay from a growing family, I figured the extra income would be nice. Plus I knew rats and that was the biggest part of the fur business back then. Oh, you’d get the occasional mink or coon, but rats were king then, especially on the marshes of Lake Erie. So I started buying fur from my basement. You’ve got to have a very understanding wife to do that. Plus I started selling some supplies. I think one of the first items was lures from A O Butcher.”

Ed Sr. continued his fur buying and the supply business part time from the basement for several years. One item that was popular with trappers was the Northern brand hip boot, inspiration for the original name he chose for the business, Northern Fur Company. When the fur boom of the seventies started, business picked up enough that a move to the garage was made. A 1-800 phone number was added for customer convenience, and orders came pouring in. While that was good for the bottom line, it became a challenge to stock enough inventories. When semi-trucks began delivering to the residential neighborhood and piles of goods had to be stacked and tarped in the driveway, they knew it was time to look for a location for the growing business.

All during this time, young Ed Jr. was helping with the work and trapping on his own as he got older. “I started on muskrats, too.” Said Ed Jr. “Then I started calling fox. They were pretty good money back in the seventies while I was still in school. I would come home weekends and work in the garage when I was in college. It was great. We had no overhead to speak of, so profit was good. But I knew that something would have to change if we were to ever expand.”

Ed Jr. graduated from Ashland University in 1985 with a degree in Business Management and Accounting. He also played center field for the Ashland Baseball team. After a stint with a minor league baseball team in Florida, he returned home to start the modern version of Northern Sport Co.

“An injury shortened my would-be baseball career,” said Ed Jr. “I decided it was time to think about a real job and the family business was ready to expand. Dad agreed and we started looking for a location.”

In the spring of 1987 they found the site they still occupy, at 9191 Leavitt Road, Elyria, Ohio. The original building needed renovation, so for the first three months, while that was done, they sold goods from the front room and operated the shipping part of the business out of the back room. But the new building, with its overhead costs, meant that seasonal trapping supply sales were not enough. Hunting and fishing supplies were added to the shelves, as well as a limited supply of outdoor clothing. But then there wasn't enough room for the increased inventories and additional space was added to the building in 1992. In 1994, an expanded line of outdoor clothing and work shoes was added.

“The business has changed a lot over the years,” said Ed Sr. “We started with trapping supplies, but now the store sells mostly work wear. We are known locally as Molnar Outdoors. The trap supply part is called Northern Sport Company now. We had so many harassment phone calls with the 800 number when it was Northern Fur, that we changed the name.”

Ed Sr. said the hunting and fishing supply part of the business has been harder to maintain, with decreased interest and increased competition from national chain stores. Fishing gear carries a lower margin, but with their proximity to Lake Erie, it is necessary to handle it. They also sell live bait and canoes. But while outdoor work wear is the mainstay of the walk-in trade, trapping supplies still make up a good portion of the mail order and convention business. “For several years we did a tremendous volume of business at the Cleveland Sport Show,” said Ed Sr. “In nine days we would sell more than we would at the store in weeks.” But even that has dropped off over the last few years.

When the mail order portion of the business started to increase, another family member was added. Son David joined the business, and now runs the shipping department, which also handles canoe sales. “About 40% of our business is e-commerce now,” said David, “and it continues to grow. We have orders coming in from all over the world. That appears to be the future in sales. If we want to stay in business, we really have no choice. We research prices from our competitors constantly so we can stay competitive. We also try to get orders shipped for next day delivery.”

That's something many trappers, waiting for a crucial piece of equipment during the season, have been thankful for.

David said they are also developing a trappers only website, www.northerntrapping.com, that will be for supplies, blogs, information and pictures that can be posted by trappers. It should be up and running by August 1st.

Through it all, Marge has been the bookkeeper for the family business, proving once again that behind most successful men, there is a successful woman.

“The boys own the business now,” said Ed Sr. “Mom and I are slowing down. I still buy fur, make lure and go to the conventions, but not like before. It’s their business now.” Marge is set to retire soon.

Lure making has always been a part of the enterprise. Ed Sr. started while still in the basement! After the move to the garage, at least the smell wasn’t so bad in the house! Ed Sr. developed a predator lure called Indian Hollow and Ed Jr. came up with Double Dose 100, a rat and coon lure. They also made Sticky Fingers coon bait and Griz Pellets. After the move to their present location, Ed’s lure making was done in the back room of the building. They bought out Jim Helfrich and Don Nicely lures and continued making them using the original formulas. All that lure making created some distinct odors that wafted out onto the sales room out front, now occupied by non-trapping customers who lacked appreciation for those particular aromas! Another move was needed.

About ten years ago, a separate shed was constructed out back to house Ed Sr.’s fur buying and lure making. Along with help from ‘Uncle’ Mike Zvosechz, Ed Sr. continues making lure for the business. He still buys fur, but not at the previous volume. “For eight years, Keith Winkler and I were partners in the fur business. We moved a lot of stuff. But there don’t seem to be the rats like there once were. I used to catch several hundred a year, but last year caught only 24 rats and 1 mink.” Ed Sr. is a familiar sight at fur auctions in Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York.

Other items Northern has marketed over the years include their trapline equipment bag called Trappers Tote. Glove Busters, a 31” gauntlet, has been a popular seller with water trappers. They commissioned Jeff Robinson, of J R Robinson and Sons, to produce a DVD on Eastern Fox Trapping that has been a good seller as well. They also bought out and market the E Z Stake.

The sale of traps during that time has changed too. “When we first started selling traps in the sixties, we could only purchase them from authorized dealers, not direct from the manufacturer,” said Ed Sr. “That kept competition down, increased costs and hindered inventory. We fought that practice for years. Finally other trap manufacturers started selling direct to dealers and most came around to direct sales to dealers. We even had special traps made just for Northern Sport Co., at one time.”

In 1991, tragedy struck on the way back from a convention in Syracuse, New York. The driver of the van carrying Ed Jr. fell asleep, and the vehicle went over the edge of the highway. Ed Jr. spent 10 days in the hospital recovering from serious injuries, and worrying about all the cash that was in the van! Fortunately, Ed Jr. recovered and the money was recovered as well.

If you attend our state convention, you can still see Ed Sr. and cousin, Ray Toth, at the Northern Sport Co booth, and sometimes helper John Zeller. Stop and say ‘Hi’ to one of the larger trap supply dealers in North America. Or you can often find them at the store, just west of

Elyria on St Rt 58, which is still a hangout for local trappers. But to talk serious trapping, you may need to head out back to Ed Sr.'s shed!