

Hill Treasures

Oh, What You'll Find at Frager's

From Knobs to Nails, Dog Collars to Mothballs, Frager's Seems to Have it All

BY NICOLE SPIRIDAKIS

An American flag hangs outside this hardware store, where hammer and screwdrivers coexist peacefully with candles and picture frames. The whine of the key machine cuts through the daily hubbub, and if you smile winningly, a friendly employee will offer you a Tootsie pop from a shoebox hidden under the counter.

Squint hard enough, and you can almost see the 1920's-era wooden cabinets—long since replaced—gleaming in the bright lights that currently illuminate modern shelves of appliances, lighting gear and goods, thermometers, and nails.

An eclectic marriage of tools and kitchen equipment, Frager's Hardware, located on Pennsylvania Avenue, is a bustling place, full of locals and the occasional government employee looking to buy supplies for repairs on Hill buildings. It's a place for "one-stop shopping"—where shower curtains are placed next to the odd carton of mothballs, hidden among narrow aisles holding an abundance of hardware, tools and supplies.

Due to a Thursday delivery, the store was especially crowded and busy the day I stopped by—I was not looking for pet supplies, although there was a nice variety of dog collars from which to choose if I had been so inclined.

Co-owner Ed Copenhaver, a cheerful man with glasses who runs the store with John Weintraub, took a few minutes out of the hectic morning hours to chat a bit about Frager's' history, equally as colorful as the aforementioned dog collars.

Copenhaver and Weintraub took over the already established hardware store, reopening it on August 5, 1975. Copenhaver, who lives on 14th Street, said with a laugh that his partner is the "brains" behind the whole operation.

The pair had met in college as fraternity brothers; later they entered the Navy and Coast Guard, respectively. After leaving the service, Copenhaver says he was "rattling around" for a while, working at a construction company in Washington, and taking courses at the George Washington University in engineering administration. After the market bottomed out in the construction industry, the two decided to pool their resources and look for a business to buy.

What they discovered was Frager's Hardware, founded in 1920 by the Frager family, and run in

the 1970s by two brothers who, Copenhaver says, had "had enough" of the business. The Fragers had been trying to sell the store for five years when Copenhaver and Weintraub came along, and, since they hadn't raised the price since 1969 when it had first gone on the market, the asking price looked good.

"They didn't understand inflation," Copenhaver says, and this proved finally to be the key selling point.

After thinking it over and looking around for about a year, the budding entrepreneurs returned to Frager's (where their contact information, taken down a year earlier, was still in evidence on a piece of paper stuck on a nail in the wall) to tell George Frager they would take over the business.

In the buying agreement, it was written in that Frager would stay on for 30 days to oversee the transfer. But after a year went by and Frager was still there, Copenhaver said they finally asked him to stay on.

"He was a real character," Copenhaver says, re-enacting the then-70-year-old's unique walk. "The store was his life, and he was happy to teach us."

Frager, who had started working in the store when he was 16 years old (in 1920) worked with the new owners for another 10 or 15 more years, until the onset of Alzheimer's Disease forced him into retirement.

When Copenhaver and Weintraub took over Frager's, the beautiful old cabinets made by George Frager's father, a cabinetmaker, were still in use. They were eventually taken out to modernize the store, although Copenhaver says he kept a few pieces for their sentimental value.

Now, hundreds of drill bits in all shapes and sizes reside in new glass cases with sliding doors, affording a quick and easy view of all the varieties of tools and parts Frager's has to offer. Still, one can't help but imagine the old wooden cabinets lined with green felt that displayed tools and equipment so many decades ago. The cabinets are impractical now, as there is much more merchandise to show in the modern hardware store.

"There was not so much variety in the old days," Copenhaver says.

In the years since the 1975 takeover by Copenhaver and Weintraub, Frager's has purchased and expanded into the store next door, where its paint operation is now based.



The original five or six employees have grown to a staff of about 40-45 employees, many of who work part-time or are students on summer break needing a job.

"We work ourselves to death here, especially when on a project," Copenhaver says amiably.

There are some long-time employees (Copenhaver believes the current record is 11 years of service)

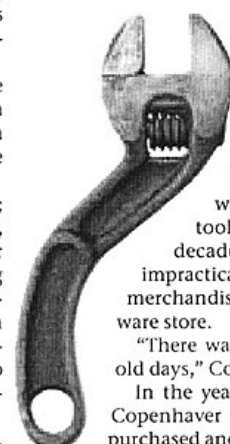
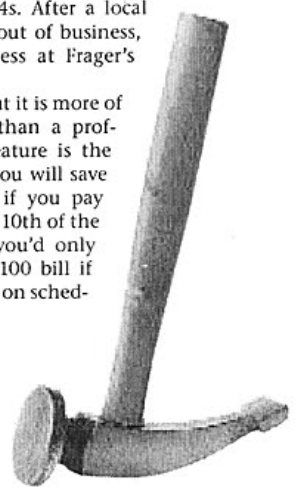
and a recent 80-year old retiree clocked in at 12 years. All are friendly and eager to assist, even on a busy day.

A majority of customers come in for small repairs and gardening supplies—I heard at least one request for an air conditioning knob while I was in the store—and Frager's does a brisk business in drywall and 2x4s. After a local Hechinger's store went out of business, Copenhaver says business at Frager's doubled.

Frager's will deliver, but it is more of a convenience service than a profitable one. A unique feature is the credit account system: you will save 10 percent per month if you pay your bill on time (by the 10th of the month). For example: you'd only have to pay \$90 of a \$100 bill if your payment is received on schedule.

Copenhaver says Frager's isn't the place to go for a large-scale building or remodeling project; that's best left to the major hardware chains. But for tools, parts, hardware, gardening supplies, a candle or three, or something to spruce up the dog or cat in these hot days of summer, Frager's is a good place to while away a few hours.

And if you're very lucky (and polite), you might receive a lollipop.



Nicole Spiridakis is one of the Voice's newest contributors.