



# ON DECK

LARSON WRITING NEXT CHAPTER IN HIS FAMILY'S RETAIL LEGACY

**DOOR COUNTY** has its share of signature businesses and one of those is On Deck Clothing Company. The small chain featuring top-end casual resort attire will be celebrating its 25th anniversary next year, but the reasons for its success go far deeper into the Peninsula's history.

Founded in 1987 by Mitch Larson in partnership with John Ostrand in one of the newly opened Top of the Hill Shops in Fish Creek, On Deck is now situated on three prominent downtown corners in Fish Creek, Sister Bay and Sturgeon Bay.

"I've always had an interest in clothing," said Larson, who said Ostrand triggered his interest in taking that passion into retail. "John worked at Al Johnson's (Restaurant) practically from the beginning and then he opened a men's clothing store, Telemark Boutique, behind Al's."

Larson accompanied Ostrand to a clothing trade show in the early 1980's which ultimately led up to On Deck's debut. In the early 1990's, Larson bought out Ostrand's portion of the business and has retained sole ownership since then.



photo by Jon Gast.

Mitch Larson with a Chris Craft in his Fish Creek store (top) and on skis as a boy at the family's Nor-Ski Ridge.



contributed photo

That ownership is rooted in an interesting family history and an iconic business ideology that blends good retail practices with a splash of entertainment.

Larson freely admits he doesn't have a college degree. But notice what comes out when he dips into a deep well of family business experience on the Peninsula and Larson won't dispute the fact he could easily be bestowed with a "Degree in Door County."

His great-grandmother, Mrs. Wenzel Bunda, opened a grocery store in Sister Bay in the late 1800's. Larson likes to tell how her first register couldn't calculate a sale in excess of \$2.99. But she sold and bartered enough to carve the family name into retail lore as the Bunda name set a pattern of growth that Larson has shadowed.

On Deck's current Fish Creek store was once leased by Mrs. Bunda's son William (Larson's grandfather) and across the street the former Bunda's Hutch (now Hide Side Corner Store) was operated by his late uncle Jack Bunda. On Deck's Sister Bay operation sits in the former Bunda's Store. Larson even followed the Bundas into Sturgeon Bay, his downtown store sitting two blocks down from the old Bunda's Department Store.

But the Larson side of the family also had as big an impact, especially the one person who probably impacted him most of all – his father Wink. The elder Larson operated the Nor-Ski Ridge ski hill in Fish Creek, where he offered fish boils when the snow melted. He purchased orchard property that would eventually provide the younger Larson with his initial vocation in the apple and cherry business.

"Growing up, the ski hill was a family-run operation," explained Larson. "My father was very hands on – built the lodge, ran the lodge, did the marketing, made the snow. He was a little bit of a show man. When he decided to put a 40-foot steel tower outside and blow snow on it and claim he had a 40-foot base of

snow he caught attention from around the country."

You won't find any 40-foot towers in or around today's On Deck stores, but make a trip into any of them and it becomes obvious that he's borrowed a page from his father's marketing manual.

You'll find full-sized Chris Craft runabout boats in the middle of the clothing displays. Historical artifacts, most pertaining to Door County, hang from the ceilings or walls.

"I'm in the retail business, but I'm also in the entertainment business. If you walked into this store and it had four white walls, all chrome racks and standard

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Mitch's father Wink Larson, left, and his 40-ft. "Snow" tower (right)



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department store fixtures, that wouldn't be special," said Larson.

"That goes back to my father when he ran the ski hill, and the image and feel to the place," he added. "He always had music playing outside. He understood the different elements to promote that business. Somehow I got a little of that in me."

One of those historical elements is an oak cooler that once sat chilling cider in the family's farm market. It was another layer of retail experience on top of the ski hill that prepared Larson for On Deck.

"I saw good times and I saw bad times," said Larson, well aware of what weather can do to ski hills and orchards. "It was hard to run a ski hill but it was a successful business. Did it make a lot of money? No. How do you define success? It's not how much money you make. It was a great family experience."

Today, Larson claims to have been a benefactor of those hard lessons. "Even, today, in this economy we are always rethinking how we do things," he said.

Fish Creek is the quintessential Larson historical remodeling effort as Larson painstakingly preserved the look and feel of one of Door County's most prominent intersections. He converted the old Alwes Market into his On Deck store.

"It's all about getting back to history," said Larson. "I like old things. I like taking an old building and making it look old."

He then blended some of his father's showmanship with some of the "merchaintainment" of his hero Walt Disney to bring the space to life.



... I'm also in the entertainment business. If you walked into this store and it had four white walls, all chrome racks and standard department store fixtures, that wouldn't be special."

Mitch Larson

"Many years ago I was in Key West and walked into new store and there was this vintage 1940 sea plane," said Larson. "I was still in the Top of the Hill Shops, but when I saw that I was convinced that if I ever had a big enough location I needed to make a statement like the sea plane."

"What is Door County known for – old vintage Chris Crafts. Seeing the reaction people have to preserving something old was a home run. If you can get them in the door to look at interesting things inside, it will hopefully result in a sale."

That's why you'll also find a gondola car from Aspen Mountain and a California mountain cable car in the collection of store artifacts.

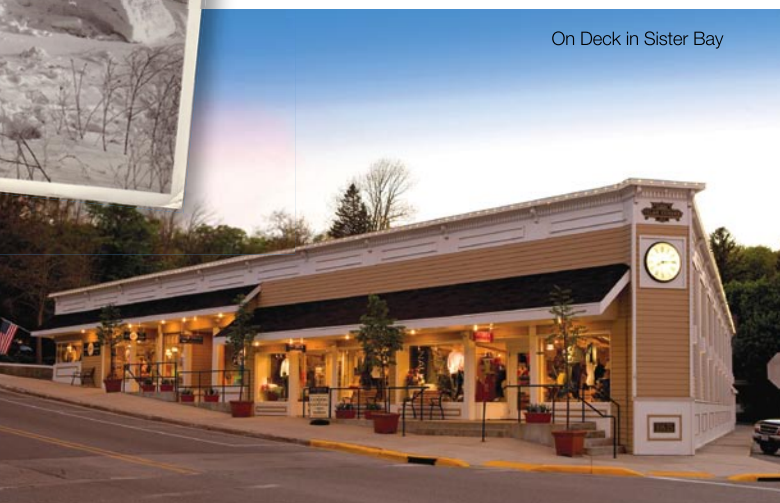
Larson said the success of the first building led Mitch and his wife Nancy to buy the Fish Creek General Store two doors down from the Alwes site. Larson was intent on keeping it a market.

"My goal is not to be On Deck, On Deck, On Deck," he said. "Besides I'm never going to be known as the guy who bought two markets and closed both of them down. I want a mixture of buildings. My wife and I went to markets around the country. If anyone has been to Napa Valley and go to Oakville Grocery that's exactly what this is."

The business is now owned and operated by Mike and Jeanne Hyde, Larson's cousin. Upstairs is Mr. Helsinki's, a restaurant that completes the retail mixture Larson was seeking.



On Deck in Sister Bay



On Deck in Sturgeon Bay.

Between the two buildings is On Deck's new Women's store.

"We were very careful with the architecture so it would fit right in," said Larson. "Someone coming around the corner would say these are three buildings from the late 1800s. We are dealing with the most visible corner in Door County so all eyes are on you. What you do and what you leave behind is very important."

There are four stores in the former Bunda building in Sister Bay, where Larson has employed controlled growth in expanding his offerings. It also serves as his distribution center.

"This 15,000 sq. ft. building sat empty for a few years," said Larson, concerned that its prominent location didn't

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offer an appropriate welcome to his hometown. "The first two years we operated out of half the building with men's and women's stores. Last year we opened up another with a new concept in clothing."

In Sturgeon Bay, Larson transformed the old Donna Theater annex building. Initially it was a just a real estate investment.

"Sturgeon Bay was one of the bigger risks we've gotten involved in, but we've got a nice year-round business down there," he said. "I like real estate and I like fixing buildings up and what I know is how to put a store in them. The growth wasn't part of a master plan but here we are with three prominent locations."

Larson tries to make each different from the other.

"There's certainly duplication in every store but we have product from hundreds of vendors so if you like one of our stores you'll be encouraged to visit the other stores," said Larson, who visits more than a fair share of top-end stores during his show excursions. "We have a good customer base and they all seem to have their favorite store."

It's a tourist area, so Larson said the merchandizing is simple: "All our stores are resort casual sportswear. I used to have a saying that if it doesn't go with a pair of jeans it probably doesn't belong in my store."

And, by the way, On Deck strays from the calendar many northern retailers employ by closing just three days a year.

"Initially we were seasonal. Because of our prominent locations it's paid to stay open," said Larson.

So it all begs the question: Is Larson a clothier or a historian?

"I don't see myself as a historian," he said. "I have deep family roots and I'm proud of that."

Unfortunately, Wink Larson died in 1987 before On Deck got off the ground.

"I think he'd be impressed," Larson said, when asked how his dad might react to his son's On Deck operation. "Maybe even somewhat surprised."

It's the kind of reaction Larson likes to get from everyone who steps through the door.

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