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Open House Imports Celebrates Their 50th Anniversary This Summer

Open House Imports, a staple of our community and Norwegian heritage, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Founded in 1966 by Lee Vogel, Nancy Sievers Vogel, and their son George Sievers, this Scandinavian imports shop has grown from a gallery to a fully stocked store with goods from all over the world, complete with family history and tradition.

The second oldest business in Mount Horeb behind Olson's Flower Shop and Christmas House, Open House Imports has been owned by the Vogel/Siever family the entire time. Originally the white Victorian house trim was purple, green, and black, but shortly after start up the gingerbread detail was painted the color it is today; a reddish orange color originated from the Swedish Dala horse.

Kept in the form of an actual house, each individual room displays certain products. There is a rosemaling room filled with beautifully painted wooden objects, a Christmas kitchen room with any cookie cutter a Scandinavian in Wisconsin would desire, and a troll room containing hundreds of authentically crafted creatures. Not to mention the countless other trinkets and quality Scandinavian items the shop holds; from candles to candies, sweaters to stained glass.

"I wish more people knew about Open House [Imports]" says Kelly Doty, an employee of 3 years. "The variety of imported goods and products is super interesting."

The current owner, Janice Sievers – who inherited the tradition from her in-laws and her husband George – takes great pride in what she does. "Continuing the Scandinavian heritage," she says is very important to her. "Marrying into this legacy, being a Norwegian, being able to carry it on...it's such an honor."

The Sievers/Vogel family placed Ola and Odin, the very first trolls in Mount Horeb, in front of their shop in 1975. In Scandinavian folklore, trolls are said to be keepers of the riches of the earth, such as rich soil and metals, and are symbols of good luck. "This is the reason they were displayed in the first place," says Sievers, explaining the authenticity in everything Open House does and has done.

She also explained that identifiers of trolls, that separate them from other similar creatures such as gnomes, include their four fingers and toes, large, long noses, and tails.

After years of truckers passing the shop on Main Street, word got around about the trolls in Mount Horeb, and as the town embraced it, the legacy grew. Following the first troll that was carved on site in front of Olson's by Mike Feeney, more than 15 trolls have been crafted and placed around town.

"Open House [Imports] is the most Mount Horeb thing about Mount Horeb," says Doty – besides trolls of course. She explains that it is one of the oldest and original establishments in the area, and carries so much more tradition than even citizens of the town know.

People from all over come to check out the Scandinavian imports shop. “We have exported to Hawaii, Alaska, and Canada,” says Sievers. “Once and a while, we have visitors from Norway and Sweden...or foreign exchange students from UW Madison.” Most of the attraction is for the trolls, she mentions, but Open House is a close second.

“Meeting people from all areas of the world and continuing a tradition,” is what Sievers mentions as her favorite part about owning a small business. “You get to have special moments and interactions every day.”

Doty, one of a few employees, says that “working at Open House is like being part of a family.” She mentions that she is very close with Janice and the other workers – Julie Sutter, Ali Klunick, Rebekah Baum and Karen Bakken – and that they are great mentors. “It’s been an amazing first job, getting to know people, especially the regulars,” says Doty.

“[One] doesn’t have to be Scandinavian to come here and/or buy our products,” mentions Sievers, addressing a common misunderstanding. “We are a Scandinavian import shop, but anyone can enjoy our products and history.”

She and Doty also note that they “gift wrap anything you’d like,” and all price tags are hand written, keeping a heartfelt touch to the store. The Norwegian way of quality is prominent, and as Sievers explains the art of rosemaling – hand painting on ordinary objects is a way to bring color and art to embellish a home – and the way the jewelry is crafted to catch the sunlight without expensive jewels, one can see that the thought and care put into each action is immense.

“A lot of love goes into what happens here,” says Doty.

Open House Imports is located at 308 E Main Street in Mount Horeb.