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The Story Behind John Fenske and Warehouse Books and Coffee

by *Charity Winters*



“Old and new books, bought, sold, and traded. A few unusual gift items.”

Just about every morning beside the slough, a little red wooden sign announces, “Yes, We are OPEN”, in painted black letters. Tucked behind this sign is a little gravel path that winds its way into the trees and down the hill, its final destination being an old red house with a porch overlooking the Seldovia Slough. Inside, a quaint little book shop offers everything from old and new books to a few pieces of pottery, a couple of guitars, and other items. Then comes an assortment of coffee and tea, cookies and muffins, and a large wooden table or a rocking chair to sit back and enjoy your beverage. Behind the counter stands a warm, smiling man

While working for Beeline Aviation, John got into herring spotting through another pilot. He did this on the side for 6 years during herring season. In the midst of this, John bought an unfinished building on Main Street, Seldovia in 1982. The building had originally been a shop project for SBE high schoolers under Hugh Smith. John completed the house as a duplex and he and Donna lived in one apartment and rented out the other to people that were logging at Jakolof. When logging ended in 1984, the Fenske’s had to come up with another use for their building and they decided to try it out as a bed and breakfast. Operating under their business license for “Fenske’s High Tide Originals” they also began what John believed was the very first official fishing charter in Seldovia. On top of all this, he used his

named John Fenske.

John and Donna Fenske have been a part of Seldovia for many years. During my interview, I was only able to speak with John as Donna was in Anchorage . However, since Donna has her own detailed history as a nurse in Alaska , she'll be a prime candidate for an article of her own someday! For now, we'll take a look at John's history.

John was born in Oregon and raised in Montana . He attended college for one year before deciding he wasn't ready for the school scene and joined the Air Force for four years instead. Later on, he became interested in welding and took a welding class. For the next three years, he worked as a contract welder and got his piloting license so he could teach flying.

In 1973, John relocated to Anchorage , Alaska – “where the action was” as he put it. At that time, work on the pipeline was in full swing and he got a job on Cook Inlet as a welder on an oil rig. He worked the dig off and on from 1974 – 1988, working mostly in the summer and taking on special projects here and there. It was in Anchorage that he met Donna – a young nurse with four of her own children from a previous marriage. The two were married in 1976. This same year, he and Donna began selling a special Alaskan souvenir in some of the local shops. Under the business name of “Fenske's High Tide Originals” (started in 1973), they bottled crude oil taken from the well head of the oil rigs where John worked. The neat little glass bottles were corked and labeled with a tag that gave the date and a brief paragraph on the history of Alaskan crude oil. One of these bottles is still on display at their coffeehouse today.

In 1978, John and Donna decided to move to Homer as Anchorage was becoming “developmentally challenged” as John put it. Neither one had a job, but they decided to make it work. John continued to contract as a welder at oil drills in the summer and also taught flying lessons for Beeline Aviation.



airplane to give flightsee tours.

In 1986, the Fenskes learned of an interesting connection they had with Seldovia. Donna had been visiting an elderly man named Andy Tetreau, giving him care as a home nurse. One day, she asked John to go with her, telling him that he would enjoy visiting Andy. Through their conversation, John discovered that he and Andy were distantly related through their many relatives in Montana where John grew up! The discovery led to a close friendship. When Andy had to relocate closer to family in later years, John offered to lease his house from him until he decided what to do with it. As the house was an original slough house from the 1930's, John was afraid that the rather “fragile” building would be ruined by a flow of renters. John bought the house when Andy decided to sell in 1989. It is this house that is now Warehouse Books and Coffee.

After John worked for the Department of Environmental Conservation for 3 years during the Exxon Valdez oil spill, he decided to return to school and get a degree. He now has a B.S. in psychology. His school years were the beginning of his latest business as it got him interested in reading and book collecting. It was then that the Fenske's developed their idea for a business on the slough. As voracious readers and book collectors, they already had a good beginning for a bookshop. They wanted to create the atmosphere of a small warehouse. Using the original pre-earthquake section of the house on the slough, John built a small bookstore and coffee shop. The shop holds several points of interest: two old cook stoves – one of them owned by Andy and the other by Harold Backer of Backer's Island . There is also an old cash register that was once used in one of Seldovia's general stores years ago.

So far, John is pleased with the reaction of the locals and tourists who have visited his shop. His only hope is that it will simply pay for itself and be a comfy place for people to enjoy their coffee or a lunch and just sit and watch the slough go by.





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