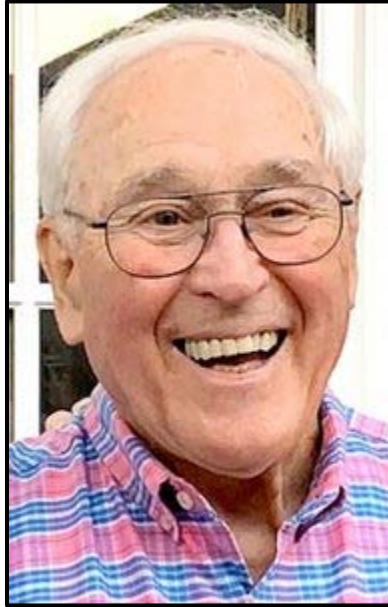


# Donald L. Fires

June 7, 1928 – October 29, 2019

ISMA Pennant No. A-11060



Donald “Don” Fires, 91, passed away Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2019, at home with his family. He was a longtime resident of Grosse Pointe Farms and a 28-year member of Detroit Lodge No. 7, joining on January 29, 1991.

Born June 7, 1928, in Detroit, to Harold Jerome Fires and Florence Catherine Smith, Don attended Southeastern High School in Detroit, graduating with the class of 1947.

Don served two years in the U.S. Army during the Korean War. Upon completion of his military service, he worked at Detroit Edison as a rigger. Upon leaving Edison, he joined Thomas Hardware Co., where he was co-owner for 35 years. The store specializes in marine hardware and still is in business today. Don completed his working years at Nels Jorgenson & Co., repairing and calibrating industrial-quality control instruments.

While at Edison, Don met his future wife, Catherine, at a company-sponsored ski trip to Montreal, where they also met their future business partners, the Joneses. The Fires and the Joneses purchased Thomas Hardware in 1959.

Don was a 45-year senior emeritus member of Bayview Yacht Club and 56-year lifetime active member of the Detroit Yacht Club. He owned Thor, one of the few lobster boats in the Great Lakes. Don, Catherine and many volunteers spent countless hours on Thor every year as members of the race committee at Bayview. His work as a race committee member was integral to the success of many international regattas.

Don was a talented wood and metal craftsman, creating items such as custom sailboat hardware, custom parts for antique cars, wooden sea chests, nautical woven rope rugs, wire rope railings for commercial buildings and anything for a friend, to name a few. He also had a tremendous fondness for music, specifically jazz, and history.

In addition to his parents, Don was predeceased by his brother, Keith Fires and son-in-law, Tom Phillips.

Don is survived by his wife of 64 years, Catherine; daughter, Sandy Phillips (the late Tom Phillips) of Kirkland, Wash. and Mackinac Island; son, Barrie Fires (Deann) of Minneapolis, Minn.; granddaughters, Carolyn Phillips of Chicago, and Morgan Phillips of Kirkland, Wash., and numerous relatives and friends.

Donations may be made to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society at [lls.org](http://lls.org).



Don Fires (on the left) and Bill Jennings at the annual lodge barbecue on April 6, 2019

## 2A | BUSINESS

# Thomas Hardware marks 100th anniversary

By Melissa Walsh  
Staff Writer

**GROSSE POINTE PARK** — A grand business built by meeting a niche market need celebrates its centennial this year. Long before social media marketing campaigns, Thomas Hardware Co. became the area's premier marine outfitter the old-fashioned way — word of mouth.

The store that sits today at the corner of Charlevoix and Wayburn was launched by Mr. Thomas and Mr. Gerish in 1919 at Lafayette and Townsend. The store's proximity to Detroit's riverfront and Belle Isle's Detroit Yacht Club and Detroit Boat Club would evolve the store from a household hardware retailer to a marine outfitter.

Even from the beginning, Thomas and Gerish, who were tinsmiths, fit ships with dorado vents, in addition to supplying residents in the area with household goods, explained the store's owner, Todd Jones.

Jones, whose father, Warren, purchased a joint share in the store in



PHOTO COURTESY OF TODD JONES

**From 1919 to 1968, Thomas Hardware was located at Lafayette and Townsend in Detroit.**

1952, has been employed there since he was 14 years old.

Warren Jones' friend, Don Fires, purchased the store's other joint share from Mr. Gerish's widow. Fires said Mrs. Gerish remained employed at the store several years and was "a great help" to the two owning partners.

"She knew the structure of the store, the bookkeeping and everything," Fires recalled.

Warren Jones and Fires met years earlier

while working at Detroit Edison. Common interests in skiing and sailing led them into friendship lasting more than 40 years.

Fires said when Warren Jones left Detroit Edison to co-own and work full-time at the store, he began helping out.

"They invited me because Warren was overloaded with work and my work at Edison was diminishing," Fires said, "so I spent

Saturdays there just helping out and staying out of the way. And I talked with Mrs. Gerish about buying her share. It happened and we went merrily on our way." Todd Jones described the partnership in the 2005 obituary he wrote about his father: "With the orders scribbled on his hand and the cash register in his pocket, Warren Jones would oversee the mayhem as customers would tear open the shipments, grab their orders and write their own invoices. Don Fires would help them with their rigging needs. The little store on Lafayette and Townsend soon became cramped and the basement was used to store the line with stopper knots in the floor to keep it from slipping through."

"I was a rigger and an iron maker and I knew

how to splice," Fires said. "I could splice wire and I could splice rope. And sailors needed that particular combination of splicing rope and wire together. It's called a tail splice. I was able to do that and that was unique."

In 1968, the partners moved the store to Mack and Kerby in Grosse Pointe Farms.

"We were established particularly in sailboat hardware before we moved to Mack and the type of household hardware we had was diminishing," Fires said. "Another thing that happened is more people were anxious to own and operate sailboats, rather than powerboats. The manufacturers of sailboats in those days were real light on the hardware because it was expensive.

"So there we were with all this hardware to sell and people wanted to buy it to fit their new boats. It sprung from a



PHOTO BY MELISSA WALSH

**Owner of Thomas Hardware Co., Todd Jones.**

tiny little industry to enormous."

Fires said he and Warren Jones had during more than 35 years in business together, he said, "I think we broke the record for partnership."

Recalling the fun he and Warren Jones had during more than 35 years in business together, he said, "I think we broke the record for partnership."

Todd Jones moved the store from Mack to its current location in 2016. "I have a small memory of the original store," Jones said, who was 2 in 1968, "because the rope and chain used to come up from the basement through the floor. I remember you'd pull the rope, cut it, tie a knot in it and let it drop down to the floor again."

Jones shares today's location with Ed Kriese, proprietor of the online sunglasses retailer oceanracing.com. He boasted Thomas Hardware offers the "world exclusive" display of the sunglasses.

"This is the only retail location in the world where you can try on Ocean Racing sunglasses," Jones said. But customers stop into the store for Jones' expertise in marine goods fulfillment.

"I think I've been at it since I was 6," he said. "My dad would buy war surplus stuff, like whip-

ping twine, and have me cut it to length and wrap it and package it in the garage."

Jones worked with his dad in the store from age 14 until his dad's death in 2005.

"That was nice. We spent a lot of time together," Jones said.

His father told him stories about the business such as how Thomas Hardware supplied the Dodge brothers with items for their power yacht, "Delphine."

"My dad said they would come in and buy 55-gallon drums of varnish and all kinds of stuff," Jones said.

Like his father, Jones is a Bayview Yacht Club sailor. He said his father and uncle, Burt Jones, were competitive racers of the Lightning one-design class sailboat.

"They were racing all the time," Jones said. "That was obviously his



PHOTO COURTESY OF TODD JONES

**Warren Jones working in Thomas Hardware, the store he co-owned with Don Fires.**

## THOMAS:

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interest and I'm sure he saw an opportunity. People would try and buy stuff for their boats and they couldn't get it. So he just started importing stuff from England. That's where all the small boat hardware was made."

In 1972, Jones said, his father and uncle procured a Tartan 42, "The Great Whisper."

"(My dad) and my uncle bought the parts from Tartan and put it together themselves," Jones said. "They bought the hull, the deck. They found a used mast and kind of cobbled it together. It was a good boat."

The brothers sailed "The Great Whisper" in more than 1,000 races, winning flags in Detroit Regional Yachting Association, Mills and Mackinac races.

Not only did Jones inherit the business, but he also acquired valuable sailing knowledge from his father and his own experience as a competitive sailor. In addition to

fulfilling marine hardware and sundries needs, Jones offers consulting services to those improving their sailboat or fitting up a newly purchased sailboat.

"The good thing about being a small business is that you're nimble," Jones said. "We go to people's boats and do installation, offer recommendations, splice ropes on site. We make shrouds on site."

Jones said he usually begins with assisting a customer with standing and running rigging.

Thomas Hardware is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday during the winter months. During sailing season, store hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday.

In celebration of the store's centennial, Jones is hosting open houses Saturdays, March 30 and April 13.

"The first one's more for the boat owners and second one is for the crew," he said.

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The original Thomas Hardware, at Lafayette & Townsend in Detroit