

Natural disasters, dangerous beasts, exotic lands: The pump business can be an adventure

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You might presume that pump manufacturing is a boring business: an industrial vocation devoid of danger, passion and international intrigue.

You would be wrong.

When storms strike and sewer lines break, when crops wither and drinking water dwindles, people often turn to the pump industry for help. And the people who build and supply those pumps—at least at South Florida-based Moving Water Industries—travel the world from the rain-drenched streets of Bangkok to the beer-barley fields of Mexico.

Work in Florida can be equally exotic, sometimes involving alligators and other dangerous critters.

Just ask Ron Dhaveloose, a 63-year-old with a gravelly laugh, a Hulk Hogan mustache, and 46 years of experience building, installing, and maintaining pumps. He's now works out of MWI 's Deerfield Beach plant but he's been a pump man since way back when.

Starting in the 1970s, Dhaveloose was a welder and a diver for a Pompano Beach-based manufacturer called Farmers Pump. In addition to carefully crafting pump propellers, Dhaveloose was also the guy customers would call when a pump got clogged and someone had to jump into a canal to clear out the blockage.

Since many of Farmers' customers were farmers, that often meant swimming through rural canals at the edge of the Everglades. Pumps in those areas might be clogged by plant debris, a hapless turtle that swam into the intake valve and got stuck, or a hungry alligator that swam in after the hapless turtle and got itself stuck, too. Whatever it was, Dhaveloose had to pull it out.

"Back then, we didn't have wetsuits," he recalls. "We had cutoff jeans and tennis shoes and we grabbed our hookah rigs and went down."

Hookah rigs are a type of diving equipment. Divers breathe out of a long hose connected to an air compressor, which typically sits on a boat or float on the surface.

In Dhaveloose's case, the air hose doubled as a communication device. Whenever there were too many alligators swimming toward him while he was underwater unclogging a pump, his dive partner sitting in the boat above would bang on the air hose with a stick to let him know it might be a good time to get back into the boat.

"I've come up and had six [alligators] right there," Dhaveloose said. "I've had them rip my hose off, my mask off. I've had them grab tools out of my hand."

Snakes were another hazard. Dhaveloose claims he's been bitten twice by water moccasins and twice by rattlesnakes, and never went to a hospital for antivenom. But he said there's an upside to all the poison that has passed through his veins:

"To this day, mosquitoes won't come hear me," he said. "They're like, 'If we bite this guy, we're going to die!'"

Work in 70 countries

It's not a gator but an eight-foot-tall wooden giraffe statue inside MWI's Deerfield Beach headquarters that is one of the few hints of the adventurous globe-trotting side of the pump business. It's a souvenir from a trip former company president David Eller took to sell pumps in Zimbabwe.

MWI has sold pumps across the U.S. and in 70 other countries. The company has pumped emergency drinking water from the Nile River in Egypt, helped drain New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, sped up

sluggish canals in Bangkok, built pumps to power salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest, and irrigated the hops and barley crops used to brew Corona beer in Mexico.

The company attracted some notoriety in the 1990s for one of these international business deals, which involved Jeb Bush before he became Florida's governor, the government of Nigeria, an \$80 million loan from the US Export-Import Bank, and allegations of bribery and influence peddling. U.S. courts cleared MWI of any wrongdoing in 2017, after 18 years of federal investigations and lawsuits which clouded the company's image and was periodically raised during Bush election campaigns.

"That's a big burden for any [small business](#) to bear," said Dana Eller, who is now guiding MWI through the largest expansion in the company's history.

Eller is the fourth-generation family owner of MWI, which can trace its history back to 1924, and his pride in the company's success runs deep. As a child, he dreamed of building pumps. Really.

Dana's great-grandfather, Hoyt Eller, came down from Alabama to work as a carpenter on the construction of the Boca Raton Hotel. After the hotel opened in 1926, Hoyt used his earnings to buy farmland in Deerfield Beach and open a small machine shop and gas station.

Hoyt's son, Marlin, wasn't much for farming. He sold his dad's land, but expanded the machine shop into a company called M&W Ironworks, which sold pumps and other machinery to South Florida farmers. Marlin and his son, David, patented about 20 new pump designs, renamed the company "Moving Water Industries" and expanded the business internationally.

After all its colorful history, the business almost didn't get passed down

to Dana Eller. In 1979, when Dana was 8 years old, his dad David told him he was thinking of selling the business.

"I started to cry and said I wanted to build pumps like my dad," Eller said. "Eight-year-olds don't usually know what they want to do, but I guess God must have put it on my heart when I was 8. That's what I wanted to do."

The second-grader cut a deal with his dad. If young Dana worked in the factory everyday after school, learned how to operate all the machinery, and studied engineering in college, David vowed he would hand him the keys to the business one day. Dana got his engineering degree from UF in 1995 and was named president in 2012.

"He handed me the keys," Dana said. "And I still love doing it."

Dana now runs the business with his siblings Daren and Danielle. His son Hoyt started working full-time as a machinist in the factory last year.

A 'hands-on business'

Meanwhile, although Ron Dhaveloose's remains in the pump business, his diving days are over. Eight years ago, at age 55, he took one last dive in the bayous of Louisiana and decided he was too old to keep getting in the water. "That's what I miss the most," he said, wistfully.

He doesn't weld as much as he used to, either. Although he's crafted thousands of pump propellers in his four and a half decades on the job, arthritis has limited his ability to perform the careful, precise welds required to stitch metal blades together into pump propellers.

"This is still a hands-on business," he said. Whether or not a propeller comes out correctly comes down to the skill and steady hand of the

worker holding the welding torch.

These days, Dhaveloose is a quality control inspector at MWI, which bought Farmers Pump in 2019. Dana Eller says he's glad to have him around to mentor younger workers—including his son Hoyt. "We don't have a retirement age," he said. "As long as somebody is able to contribute, pass on knowledge and train the next generation, they can keep working."

Dhaveloose, for his part, doesn't quite know what he would do with himself if he retired. He might use his captain's license to run charter boats, devote more time to the jalapeños growing in his garden, or concoct even more elaborate holiday decorations to display in his front yard.

But more than anything, he wants to build pumps.

"I'm one of those stubborn ones," he said. "I'm going to keep working or I'm going to drop dead, one or the other."

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