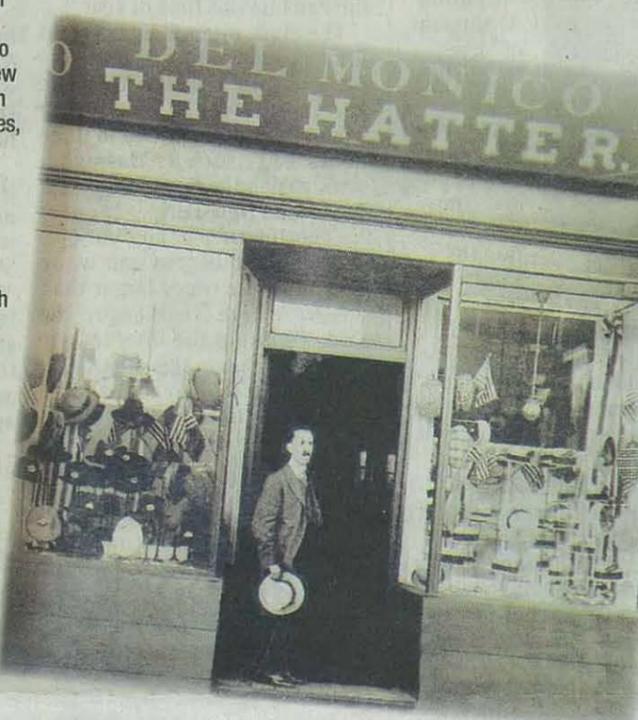


Peter Casolino/Register photos



Ernest DelMonico with some of his staff members at DelMonico Hatter in downtown New Haven. They are, from left to right, Mandi Jones, Johnisha Allen and Gregory Foster. The business, founded in 1908 by DelMonico's grandfather, celebrates its 100th anniversary this year.



A portrait of the business' founder, shown with some antique hats.

DelMonico marks 100th year

By Angela Carter
Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — Bonnet or brim, there's a century of hats to be mined in a cast iron building at 47 Elm St., home to DelMonico Hatter, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year.

In the early 1900s, headwear was a fashion staple and for women, having feathers in their hats was a sign of wealth.

"The biggest year in the U.S. for hat production was 1903," said current store owner Ernest DelMonico, who took over the business after his father, Joseph DelMonico, died in 2001.

Founder Ernest DelMonico — the current owner's grandfather — whose portrait is on display at the store's entrance in proximity to a few aged beaver hats, started the company in 1908. A lot has changed over 100 years, his grandson said.

"We're a niche business now," DelMonico said. "There were 20 or 30 stores selling hats here early in the 20th century."

Beyond the fact that century-old small businesses seem to be rare, the 100-year anniversary mark will be a memorable one for DelMonico Hatter.

The business was named 2007 Hat Retailer of the Year by The Headwear Association and the celebration coincides



A vintage photo of founder Ernest DelMonico, the current owner's grandfather, on display in the hat shop.

with the latest movie release in the Indiana Jones series, "Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," a portion of which was shot in downtown New Haven, blocks from the store. "We sell a lot of the Indiana Jones hats," DelMonico said. "The movie is a big event for the hat industry."

DelMonico watched a pre-screening. His review? "The car chase on Elm Street was the best scene in the movie. The movie was good and New Haven looked good in it."

At the store's origin, straw hats were sold from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Now, they are sold all year long thanks to

a revolutionary invention: the Internet.

In December 2002, DelMonico — who built his career in the computer software industry before taking over the store — began offering merchandise on the Web.

"I knew the business. I'd been around it all my life but not active," he said.

Customers are perusing the site for brands such as Tilley, Borsalino, Kangol and Stetson, not to mention a wide array of familiar styles including Panama straw hats, fedoras, caps, berets and outbacks.

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Hatter: DelMonico hits century mark in city

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Some sell for \$500, while others are more moderately priced around \$48.

"I personally wear the Borsalino," DelMonico said. "But I like the Panama this time of year."

The store often is buzzing on Fridays and Saturdays with people who first surf the Web site and then travel to New Haven from places that are two to three hours away such as Massachusetts, eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York.

"The Internet is now 80 percent of our business and we're now multiple times larger than we were five years ago," he said. "Without the Internet, we wouldn't have the business. There is no retailer that should not have an Internet site."

Even though one does not need to have on a hat in public to be in good form in contempo-

rary times, people remain concerned about sun protection, a leading motivation for wearing hats these days, according to The Headwear Association.

"That gets us a lot of business," DelMonico said.

The hat shop also makes custom hats for marching bands, fife & drum corps groups and fraternal organizations, as well as collapsible and non-collapsible top hats.

Bob Broner, president of The Headwear Association, could not be reached for comment, but when the organization gave DelMonico Hatter its award, it said: "DelMonico Hatter is a thoroughly modern business informed by strong tradition, with a sophisticated e-commerce Web site as well as its bricks-and-mortar address on Elm Street."

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