



Handler's closes up shop

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HARWICH PORT — One day in 1972, Jan Jones-Henry got a call from her husband, asking her for a favor.

He was at work at Handler's Auto Parts, a business founded by Jones-Henry's parents in 1937. It was too busy for him to get away, so he asked her to drive to Rhode Island and pick up some parts.

"I got asked to make a trip one day, and I've been here ever since," Jones-Henry said yesterday between answering phone calls and helping customers at the Route 28 auto parts yard.

She joined a company that included her husband and her brother and, eventually, her sister, brother-in-law and son as well. When her parents, Louis and Mollie Handler, retired, the siblings took over.

"My father thought it would be a good idea if the whole family worked together," she said.

Now, after more than 70 years, the family legacy of Handler's Auto Parts is about to come to an end. The siblings have decided it is time to retire and have put the property up for sale.

"Life is short, and you need some time to do other things," Jones-Henry said.

"It's time," added her brother, Robert Handler.

The 3.1-acre property abuts Allen Harbor and has strong development potential, said David Lank of Boston Realty Advisors, the real estate agent handling the sale.

"The type of person who would buy this property is an investor who would be looking to develop the land," Lank said. "It's really a perfect location for any kind of retail or commercial asset."

Rather than setting an asking price, the sellers have decided to accept all offers and "see what the market will bear," Lank said. "We're going to see what kind of offers come in."

The land passed an environmental inspection four years ago and has been subject to regular monitoring ever since, Lank said.

Several years ago, near the peak of the market, an offer of \$4 million was made on the property before the financing fell through, he said. In fiscal 2010, the property was assessed at \$655,200.

Town zoning would allow a variety of commercial, non-industrial uses on the property, said Harwich Town Planner David Spitz. It might be harder to get approval for residential units, he said, unless the buyer proposed a mixed-use design that incorporated both housing and commercial space.

"That's the most likely way to get residential in there," he said.

Though the siblings are ready to retire, they expect to miss some parts of their jobs.

"I love the people. I like the idea of every day, there's something different," said Handler, who began helping out in the yard when he was seven or eight. "I just love what I do."

In this, he takes after his father, he said.

"He was very, very much a people person," Handler said. "We'd have people come in and sit on those chairs and talk to my dad for hours."

One regular customer was Charles Lombard of Harwich. Yesterday, he recalled one day in the early 1970s when he and his son, who was a year-and-a-half old at the time, went to Handler's for an auto part.

Over the phone, Louis Handler had quoted a price of \$1 for the part if Lombard removed it from the car himself. But when Lombard arrived at the register, the owner asked for \$5. After an attempt to talk the price down, Lombard turned over the \$5.

"I gave him a \$5 bill, and he took the \$5 bill from my hand and handed it to my son," Lombard laughed. "Told him to buy himself some candy or some ice cream. Here he is, Louis Handler, being a hero on my \$5. He was a good man, a nice man."

What Robert Handler will not miss about the auto parts business is, well, the autos; he has never had any personal interest in working on cars.

"I hate that aspect of it," he said.

And the work has not always been easy. Robert Handler once got caught in an explosion while cutting into an oil tank, he said; Jones-Henry's husband once suffered a broken sternum after being trapped under a vehicle he was working on.

But, looking back, they are pleased with their place in a family tradition.

"Our father was just very proud when his kids joined the business," Jones-Henry said. "We all wanted to continue it."

The siblings plan to use their retirements to relax, spend time in warmer climates and reconnect with grandchildren.

"I would like to spend some time in Florida," Jones-Henry said, "some time in Arizona, and lots of time on my boat."

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