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## On the docks, a very Mackinac business tells a story of survival

By Tom Henderson



**Credit:** Tom Henderson/Crain's Detroit Business

Dan Musser and Veronica Dobrowolski on the Arnold dock in front of the Senator freight boat.

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Some summer jobs last longer than others. You could argue that Veronica Dobrowolski's on the Mackinaw City docks has lasted for 35 years.

Dobrowolski now leads Arnold Freight, whose ships haul supplies, mail and FedEx deliveries, lumber — and sometimes horses — to and from Mackinac Island.

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Dobrowolski's and her company's story ties deeply into the island's history and some of its most famous names, including the family that long owned the Grand Hotel and the former senator who helped get the Mackinac Bridge built.

The Arnold name was long associated with a passenger ferry line, but its roots were in freight going back to the 19th century, and its story is Mackinac to the core.

After graduating from Cheboygan High School in 1988, Dobrowolski went to work on the dock of Shepler's Mackinac Island Ferry in Mackinaw City, assisting passengers with their bags and doing an assortment of odd jobs. A lifelong fan of boats and water, she fell in love with the job.

"Soon, I was working 80-90 hours a week," Dobrowolski said.



Working on the dock had got into her blood. Even after leaving for Lake Superior State University, she would drive down from Sault Ste. Marie on weekends in the fall to work on the ferries, and every summer she was back working those long hours.

"I became very close to the Shepler family. I learned a lot from Bill Shepler," she said, referring to Shepler's president then.

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She got her degree in business administration, but helping run the docks was all the career she was interested in. "I loved the water. I loved boats. I loved the Upper Peninsula," she said. "When I was in college, Bill told me 'We really need you to run our dock operation.'"

That was in 1991. In 1992, she was named director of operations and head of human resources at Shepler.

"Over the years, I hired more than 1,000 people," she said. "I loved hiring young people and watch them grow. I still hear from a lot of them. Some of them are doctors and attorneys, and some are boat captains."

In 1993, Dobrowolski got her captain's license, which she still has. "I didn't use it a lot, but I wanted to have it. I'd work lunch breaks piloting the ferries, but I mainly ran the dock in Mackinaw City."

Today she is CEO of Arnold Freight Co. LLC, which ferries supplies, U.S. mail,

FedEx deliveries and lumber and other building materials to the island, running daily from St. Ignace, even year-round in those winters, like last winter, when the ice doesn't freeze solid from the city to the island.

In the spring and fall, Arnold ferries the 400 horses that winter in Pickford Township in the Upper Peninsula to and from their stables on the car-free island, where they pull the taxis, tour carriages and delivery and garbage carts all season.

Arnold has 25 employees, many of them, Dobrowolski said, with more than 30 years of seniority.

How Arnold Freight came to be is a complicated tale of changing ownership, ongoing financial struggles and Dobrowolski's perseverance.

In 2010, the Arnold Transit Co., a predecessor company that carried freight to Mackinac Island, was sold to a Chicago attorney named James Wynn.

Arnold Transit was founded in 1878 and sold to Prentiss Brown in 1921 and run by the Brown family until the sale to Wynn. Dobrowolski was recruited to help run the business. "I wanted the challenge," she said.

Brown was a U.S. senator from 1936 to 1943 and was instrumental in getting the Mackinac Bridge built, serving as chairman of the Mackinac Bridge Authority from its inception in 1950 to its 1957 opening and on until his death in 1973.

Challenges, Dobrowolski got. The operation was cash-strapped. Wynn couldn't afford upkeep and repairs on the fleet of newer catamaran ferries. In 2014, the investment group backing Wynn foreclosed, which resulted in the public auction of two catamarans, the high-speed vessels favored by passengers, and his removal as president.

"In 2014, we weren't going to open the season, but I decided to put the slower,

old steel-hull ferries from the 1950s back into service and cut passenger fees," said Dobrowolski, who ran the business after Wynn's departure.

They got through the season, but barely.

In 2016, Jerry Fetty, owner of the St. Ignace-based Star Line ferries, bought Arnold Transit's passenger ferries and one of its freight boats, the Huron, as part of a process to head off bankruptcy proceedings.

A new company, Mackinac Island Ferry Capital LLC, owned by Cincinnati investors, continued to own the other Arnold ferry, the 92-foot Corsair, and did business as Arnold Freight Co. Dobrowolski continued to run the business.

In April 2019, Dobrowolski and four partners based in Munising bought out the Cincinnati investors and got a long-term lease to operate out of Mackinac Island's coal dock.

## **Generational wealth joins the team**

Enter Dan Musser III. His family had owned the iconic Grand Hotel, which opened in 1887, since 1932, when his great uncle, W. Stewart Woodfill, bought it.

In 2019, [Musser sold the hotel](#) for an undisclosed but pre-COVID pandemic, top-of-the-market price to Denver-based KSL Capital Partners LLC, whose website lists a portfolio of 104 high-end hotels, resorts and ski lodges.

In 2020, Dobrowolski told Musser her partners might be interested in selling their stake in Arnold.

"Dan said, 'Count me in,'" she recounted.

Or, as it turned out, count in his wife, Marlee Brown. She is Prentiss Brown's granddaughter, and her father Paul Brown was CEO and her cousin Bobby Brown was the general manager when Arnold was sold to Wynn. Marlee

bought out Dobrowolski's partners and became president. Dan is chairman.



**Credit:** Arnold Freight

Marlee Musser on the Robin E freight ship.

The Mussers own Musser Freight Co. LLC. As Marlee Brown was buying her majority ownership in Arnold, Musser Freight bought another 92-foot freight

vessel from Shepler's, the Sacre Bleu, and renamed it the Senator in honor of her grandfather. Musser Freight leases the Senator to Arnold.

Dan Musser's and Dobrowolski's partnership extends beyond Arnold Freight. Since 2021, Dobrowolski has been general manager of another boat company, Sip 'n' Sail Cruises LLC, which she co-owns with Andrew Doud, the fourth-generation owner of the Doud's Market grocery store on the island.

He is a cousin of Margaret Doud, who owns the Windermere Hotel on the island and has been the island's mayor since 1975, running unopposed and winning re-election in May.

They own an 81-foot-long party boat called the Isle Royale Queen III, which has a capacity of 97 but they generally limit sales to 80 to allow passengers a bit more room aboard. And from Musser Freight they lease the Robin E, a 55-foot glass-bottom boat available for private charters of 10-45.

The Robin E is named after Dan's grandfather and sister. His grandfather, Robin Bruce Epler, was a West Point graduate who died in the Second World War as a test pilot for the U.S. Army Air Corps, and his oldest sister, Robin Epler Musser, was named for him.

Musser Freight also owns a 28-foot landing craft called the 906 Express, named for the island's area code, which is leased to Arnold Freight and used to haul U.S. mail to and from the island daily.

Dobrowolski is also involved in a third island boating operation as general manager of East Dock LLC, which runs the private dock next to the state park harbor. It is 180 feet long and provides short- and long-term docking for \$6 a foot for yachts and cruise ships.

The dock is owned by Patricia and William Anton. He is the chairman emeritus of the board of trustees of the Culinary Institute of America.

Dobrowolski is also a partner with Bob Benser Jr. in VB Mackinac LLC, which owns and rents out a retail building on Main Street, at the corner of the Arnold Freight dock. Benser and his family own several iconic island businesses, including Original Murdick's Fudge, the Chippewa Hotel and the Pink Pony bar and restaurant.

"Veronica is probably the hardest-working person I know," said Chris Shepler, the ferry company's president. "She's always been diligent, making sure things get done correctly. She went from being a deck hand to our dock master in Mackinaw City. She ran the show for us for many years. She's such a huge part of the Mackinac Island community."



By Tom Henderson

Tom Henderson writes about businesses statewide for the monthly Crain's Michigan Business feature.



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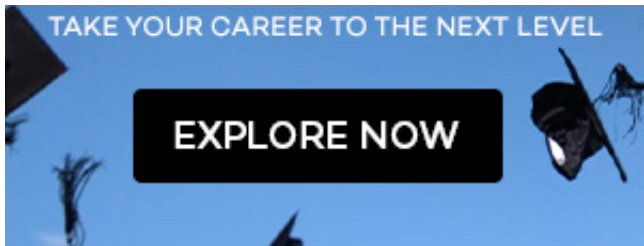
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