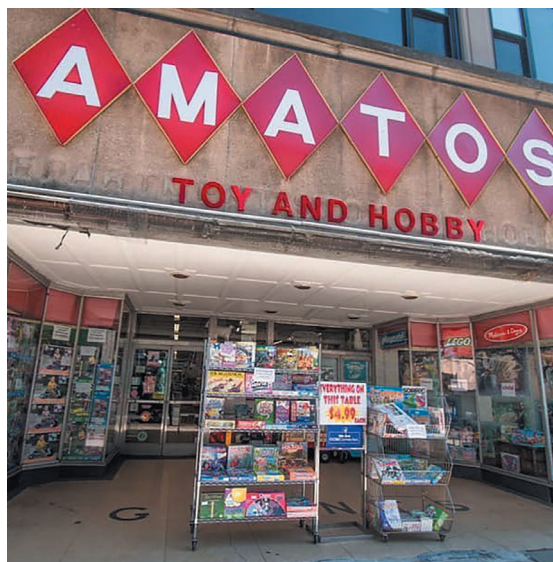


After starting during the tumultuous years of World War II, Amato's Toy and Hobby has survived another catastrophe with the COVID-19 pandemic to reach its 80th anniversary in 2020.

In 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands and Belgium and began the London Blitz, the first Captain America comic book went on the newsstands, and gas was 11 cents a gallon.

In Middletown, Connecticut, 14-year-old Vincent Amato took the first steps toward starting a family business that would still be going strong eight decades later, employing a third generation of the family.

Today, Amato's Toy and Hobby has separate family-owned stores in New Britain and



times as a local business leader over the decades and was profiled in the New York Times in 1989.

Steve started working for his father at age 9, sorting smoke liquid capsules for American Flyer locomotives and earning a nickel a bag. By age 13, he was helping select which plastic models to buy for the store. When he graduated high school, he started working at the New Britain store full time.

The COVID-19 shutdown highlighted how much the stores are a fixture of the local retail landscape.

The New Britain store used its large storefront windows to display games and puzzles for curbside pickup during the shutdown. Custom-

Amato's celebrates 80 years of survival

Gary Wollenhaupt

Middletown and a thriving online business, all started by a young man who just wanted to build model airplanes.

After his local hobby store closed, Vincent bought \$100 worth of model airplane kits and sold them from his father's plumbing supply store. Later, he purchased an inventory of closeout Lionel trains from another store and sold train sets.

At one point, the business grew to four locations. Then the family divided the two stores and online business among the Amato siblings to run independently. Steve and Sheri Amato own the store in New Britain, while Steve's sister Diane Gervais runs the original store in Middletown. Her daughter, Caroline, Vincent's granddaughter, helps at the store. Brother Peter and his wife, Terry, run the online business, amatostoyandhobby.com. Dubbed "The Toymaster" in local media, Vincent Amato passed away in 2012. His wife, Phyllis, is still involved with the family business. He had been recognized many



Vincent Amato

ers could look at photos on the store's Facebook page or come by and browse, and call in to place an order. It was like a big vending machine, with customers ordering by numbers placed on the boxes, said Steve Amato.

The windows could hold about 200 different puzzles and games. They even sold the world's largest jigsaw puzzle from Disney, with over 40,000 pieces.

Both stores have received recognition in their communities. The New Britain location was named one of the Top 25 Independently Owned Toy Stores in the country, while the Middletown location was named the Best Toy and Hobby Store by Hartford Magazine for several years.

It's not unusual to see three generations of family members shopping in the stores. For many families, it's a Christmas tradition.

One of the secrets to their longevity is adaptability. From starting out selling airplane kits in a plumbing



Long-time employee Danica Levesque works a festival.



Steve displays a new shipment of puzzles for the Facebook page.



Sheri and Steve Amato have worked together for over 30 years.

supply store, they've sold snacks and candy, cigarettes, bicycles and go-karts over the years. The New Britain store became a Scouting store to sell Pinewood Derby kits and has become the go-to place for Boy Scout and Girl Scout supplies for nearly 40 years.

"You have a certain amount of customers coming in, and you have to think about what they're looking for and what you can sell them," Steve said. "But you have to look at how much you make off each product; you gotta have a mix. Don't put all your eggs in one basket."

Steve and Sheri keep a close eye on the margins for each product. They see the value in selling used games or model trains with relatively low ticket sales but have a high margin compared to high-dollar items like RC vehicles.

"While it's good to have those and it brings people in, our recycled game department makes 75 to 80% so we focus on buying and selling those games," Steve said.

He's been steadily buying model railroad collections from retirees leaving the state over the years, moving for better weather and lower taxes.

The store runs with about a half dozen people, most of whom have been there for years. Some are retirees who want to work with their favorite hobbies.

"It's pretty easy to find part-timers who are retired, but it's hard to give a high school kid a job these days," Steve said.

They used to keep inventory on paper but upgraded to a computer point-of-sale system in the 90s to keep track of active inventory and reorder product. He remembers using handwritten receipts to take stock at the end of each day and then going to the storeroom to replenish the shelves.

The New Britain location is in a former department store with 10,000 square feet split among toys and hobbies. The last time they did a physical inventory, the store had 22,000 individual SKUs. Over the years, Steve has been tempted to move to a location with more foot traffic like a mall or a revitalized neighborhood, but owning the building has helped them weather tough times compared to other stores that rented space.

"There was a hobby shop specializing in military models, and he was paying a lot of rent to have middle-class moms push baby strollers by the store," Steve said. "He should have moved, but he stayed there and went out of business."

The Amatos take the store out



The Amato family has been a fixture in Connecticut business for more than 80 years.

into the community, setting up at local and state events for hobbyists and the general public like the Mum Festival and the Polish Festival. The annual Amherst Railroad Hobby Show was one of the last big events before the pandemic hit. In the past, they've set up booths with \$100,000 in merchandise at local festivals. They're active in toy drives for Christmas, and they drove a truckload of toys to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, after the flood a few years ago.

"I enjoy doing it, it makes you feel really good, but that's also publicity that you can't buy," Steve said.

They hold craft days one Saturday a month for kids. "I think I have as much fun as they do," Sheri said.

They hold a train sale twice a year, set up a grill for hot dogs on

the sidewalk, and serve Sheri's homemade apple crisp.

"We've done four or five times as much sales as a normal Saturday just because we're giving away hotdogs," Steve said.

It can be hard to build up enthusiasm for events, especially when it may seem like they don't draw a crowd.

"There are times when I think, why am I doing this? But you just can't stay in your shop and wait for people to come in," Steve said. "It's not easy, but no one ever said it's gonna be easy."

Internet sales, especially eBay, have been lucrative. Vincent Amato kept all kinds of promotional materials and old stock over the years, which have become collectibles.

"All those years, Dad never threw anything away," Steve said. "When you start with \$100, and you don't have some big bankroll, you reuse, you repurpose and you recycle because it's a necessity, not because it's green." They've scored big sales from rare promotional materials like a flier for a Batmobile model kit and Estes rocket signage.

"With one piece, I made a profit that I would make on 10 radio-controlled trucks," Steve said.

He shies away from selling new products online because of the price competition and the fact that you don't create a local customer.

"If they buy from the store, they'll come for repairs and buy parts, but if you're selling on eBay to some guy across the country, what's the likelihood he's going to do anything else with you anyway," Steve said.

They learned from an early age to not compete on price.

"Dad always ingrained in us, you don't build a business by being the cheapest guy on the block," Steve said. **HM**


HISTORIC HOBBY SHOPS

111 years old



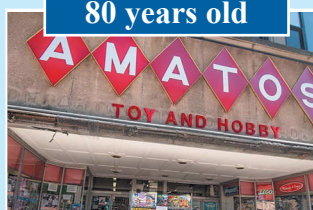
Nicholas Smith Trains & Toys, Broomall, PA

86 years old




Eugene Toy & Hobby, Eugene, OR

80 years old




Amato's Toy & Hobby, Middletown & New Britain, CT

74 years old



Nassau Hobby Center, Freeport, NY

74 years old



Schaefer's Hobby Shop, St. Louis, MO