

Ormond Beach's Tropical Seas is the last of the suntan-lotion companies still based in Volusia

By Linda Florea, ORLANDO SENTINEL—

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Once upon a time, people gathered along the ocean shore to revel in the sun, sand and surf — and work on that perfect tan to show off back home.

An industry sprung up in and around Daytona Beach, "The World's Most Famous Beach," as young entrepreneurs mixed various tanning concoctions and peddled their wares to vacationers and other bathers.

These days, sunscreen lotion is more popular than suntan lotion, and that industry built on the beach has shifted as the sands do with the tides.

"In the '60s, '70s and '80s — for three decades — suntan companies flourished here," said Dan Knorr, chief executive officer of Tropical Seas in Ormond Beach.

Some of those companies have survived and continue to thrive, though they now have limited connections to what was once considered the nation's suntan-lotion capital.

Panama Jack, founded in 1974 by Jack Kats, still manufactures its products in Daytona, but the corporate offices are in Orlando. Banana Boat, which moved to Delray Beach from the Florida Keys in 1981, was sold to Playtex in 1992 and moved to Connecticut, though it still has a production facility in Ormond Beach. Ron Rice's Ormond Beach-based Hawaiian Tropic was sold in 2007 to Playtex (which was sold that same year to Energizer Holdings), and its headquarters is now in Connecticut as well.

Tropical Seas is apparently the only suntan/sunscreen-product business still based on the "Fun Coast" of east Volusia County.

According to Knorr, a big reason the industry's local roots shriveled was the rise of large retail chains, whose corporate offices in distance states made it hard for local stores to buy local products.

"We used to be able to go in and make a sales pitch to the store or department manager," Knorr said of the grass roots marketing of that day. "If they liked that, they had the ability to buy."

He said stricter U.S. Food and Drug Administration requirements for the labeling and testing of suntan- and sunscreen-related products also slowed the industry and led to major expenses for manufacturers.



Dan Knorr, chief executive officer of Tropical Seas, inspects product quality in fall 2009. Tropical Seas also sells spa and beauty products. (PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN KNORR / February 10, 2010)

Knorr got his start in 1979, when he came to Florida on vacation but returned to Ohio as a Beach Buff distributor, driving a rented truck full of suntan lotion back North. He moved to Florida in 1982, after Daytona Beach-based Beach Buff entered bankruptcy reorganization, and worked a year for another brand, Sun Solution. He then hooked up with Hawaiian Tropic until 1987.

He returned to Ohio again, but when he heard that Beach Buff was for sale in 1988, he bought the company and reformulated the products, with a biodegradable lotion, Reef Safe, as his flagship product.

In 1995, Knorr purchased Bimini Magic, out of Virginia Beach, Va., and renamed its sunburn-relief gel Beach Buff burn cooler. Just last month, he acquired Native Tan, a value-priced manufacturer founded in Daytona Beach back in 1962.

All three lines are now marketed under the Tropical Seas brand, which includes spa and beauty products. The business also sells Itzazu hand soap, which changes color after 15 to 20 seconds of friction as a way to get children to comply with federal recommendations for healthy hand scrubbing.

"I think, with the biodegradable formulas we have, [that] we've created the second generation of sun-care products out of Daytona," Knorr said.