



Source: photo of young Dave is from <https://www.morrobayshellshop.com/>.

Seashells of the World Have Come to Morro Bay

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The Shell Shop is a Morro Bay institution prized by residents and visitors alike. It's alive and well and continues to be in operation as a family business as it has since 1955. Proprietor David Thomas started selling shells from his father's commercial fishing hauls at the budding age of ten.

The elder Mr. Thomas, Lawrence, was a skilled diver and fisherman, working with Joe Giannini and other local fishermen. He also worked with Dean Tyler and Ernie Porter to retrieve and preserve items from US Navy ships which sank off Point Honda in tragic circumstances. The one-ton anchor in front of the shop is from the salvage project. The Shell Shop has donated other artifacts to the Maritime Museum and other historical preservation institutes.

The shells in the Shell Shop collection come from places all over the world, including Pacific islands, Mexico, the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, Zanzibar, and India. Most of the shells offered for sale at the Shell Shop are byproducts of commercial fishing. Purchasing the shells helps to support fishermen around the world while providing the opportunity for people to have wider access to oceanic treasures through the beauty of seashells.

Acquiring thousands of shells from all over the world has led to unique finds. One of the rarest shells in the shop is a *Cypraea fultoni*, which is highly sought after by

specialty collectors. Desired less for its beauty, the *fultoni*'s attraction is that it is randomly found in the stomach of a tasty deepwater fish from Africa called a mussel cracker, and it must be removed before stomach acid ruins the shell.

The coral selection in the shop was purchased over 30 years ago in a remarkable turn of events. A supplier in the Philippines contacted Mr. Thomas with news of an impending embargo. However, a one-time permit to export coral that had already been harvested would be offered. As Mr. Thomas recalls, "We literally communicated via Air Mail letters which took two weeks. I told my supplier that yes, go ahead and ship whatever he had, no need to ask my permission in advance. When the supplier received his permit, he sent all of his and other exporters' stock to Morro Bay—nine 40-foot containers worth!" All the coral for sale in the shop is from that collection; no more coral will be purchased.

The Shell Shop customers' most popular purchase is a shell from our own local waters, the iridescent shell of the red abalone. This abalone was harvested in large quantity along our coastline until the 1960s. The shells came from abalone processing plants which also operated here in Morro Bay.

The Thomas family has been and will continue to be good stewards of the environment while being a wonderful asset to Morro Bay.