



Founders Gary Schaezlein, left, and Jeff Jones in front of their second store, an old schoolhouse, in the early '70s. Photo courtesy of Western Mountaineering.

## OUTDOOR BIZ

# GETTING DOWN IN SILICON VALLEY

## WESTERN MOUNTAINEERING, SAN JOSE'S FEATHERED SUCCESS, ONE RARE BIRD

By Pete Gauvin

In San Jose, a city synonymous with big tech companies and big freeways, it seems strikingly incongruous to have a small soft-goods company making high-end down sleeping bags for the pebble-sized outdoor market. Of course, having any product made on these shores is a rarity today, let alone a product that requires stitching.

But a specialty outdoor gear manufacturer which has sewn all its products in the capital of Silicon Valley for more than 35 years? You might expect to find dairy farms in Berkeley first.

Yet, like a lone hiker soldiering up a pass with a headwind and dark clouds looming, Western Mountaineering hasn't turned tail to join the others packing up in the parking lot to head home. The company's perseverance and singular focus — creating the highest quality down bags on the market — have been rewarded with a healthy niche business, a strong reputation and steady, manageable growth.

Since the slowly dying retail store closed a few years ago, a loss mourned by the South Bay's increasingly subterranean backcountry community, many casual observers may have assumed that Western Mountaineering had stopped producing bags as well. In actuality, the wholesale business, which had been run separate from the retail arm for more than a decade, has continued to loft up like one of Western's 850-fill goose down bags.

Started in 1970 by two San Jose State University students, Gary Schaezlein and Jeff Jones, who shared a love for hiking, climbing and ski touring, Western

Mountaineering is one of the few companies in the increasingly consolidated outdoor market that hasn't been swallowed up by a bigger fish or moved its manufacturing overseas. All Western's bags and down garments are still produced in San Jose.

"We started with the retail store and for the first 20 years or so sold direct to customers through stores in San Jose and Santa Cruz (which was sold in 1989 prior to the Loma Prieta Quake). We gained a good reputation for service and quality," says Schaezlein.

Gorilla capitalists might look at Western and think, "Wow, if I moved the manufacturing to Southeast Asia, we could produce twice the bags at half the cost and make a killing!" But Schaezlein is an anachronistic businessman. "I don't want to create a big company. I like to produce a quality-made product that I have control over."

In 1989, Jones and Schaezlein split ways: Jones took over the retail operation and Schaezlein took ownership of the manufacturing business. When the specialty outdoor industry started to give way to chains and big box retailers, Jones decided to leave the business entirely in the early '90s. He sold the San Jose store to Marmot Mountain Works, which kept the Western Mountaineering name and continued to sell its full product line (Marmot had two other Bay Area stores at the time, in Berkeley and Marin; only the original Berkeley mountain shop remains, as well as two stores in the Seattle area.).

### LIGHTWEIGHT LOFT ON THE RISE

"I took on the wholesale operation and became more aggressive about selling in other stores across the country," Schaezlein recalls. "We maintained our focus on producing quality lightweight bags and when the lightweight revolution really got going in the mid-'90s we were able to create a name for ourself with bags like the 1.5-pound Iroquois made with 1.6 oz down-proof ripstop fabric."

In the late '90s, Western kept the lightweight thread spooling by coming out with the first one-pound bag, the Highlite, utilizing a half-length zipper and .9 oz down-proof parachute material. "There's about 6-7 yards of ripstop in a bag. We were able to drop a one-and-a-half pound bag (rated to 35-40 degrees) down to a pound with the lighter weight fabric."

Western sold a thousand of these bags in the first year, which is a lot for a small company that sews all its bags in house. These one-pound bags also caught the attention of the overseas market. Western now sells to distributors in Japan, Australia, Korea, Canada, Sweden, Finland, England and Germany, among others. "We've been able to market our products throughout the world," Schaezlein says. "People appreciate that our bags are made in the U.S., not China."

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But in this day and age where the bottom-line reigns supreme like absolute power corrupts, Schaezlein is an anachronistic businessman. "I don't want to create a big company. I like to produce a quality-made product that I have control over."

Which is not to say the company hasn't looked to grow — just to keep that growth manageable, without popping at its seams or compromising product quality. Today, Western produces about 10,000 bags per year, about four times the 2,000-3,000 bags it was turning out each year in the early '90s. About 25-30 percent of today's production goes overseas while the rest stays in the U.S. market.

### A STITCH IN HISTORY

Schaezlein, from San Francisco, and Jones, from Los Angeles, were 22 years old when they met in college and started the company. By learning to repair their own gear they became familiar with sewing machines. "The first item we made was a poncho and stuff sack," Schaezlein recalls. "When our sewing skills improved, we bought down from Canada, the best fill power we could buy, and made our first sleeping bags. We used 1.9 oz. ripstop nylon and produced a bag in the three to three-and-a-half pound range, which was considered lightweight at the time."

In the late '60s and early '70s, the Bay Area was emerging as one of the epicenters of an outdoor industry catering to the public's growing interest in backcountry travel. Several pioneering companies were established, including The North Face, Sierra Designs and the Ski Hut in Berkeley, which produced the Trailwise brand.

In 1970, Jones and Schaezlein joined the wave by opening their first shop, a thousand square feet with one room for retail and one for sewing, on West San Carlos Street near downtown San Jose. Soon after, they moved into an old school house (see photo), now the site of the San Jose Convention Center. They stayed there until 1974 when they purchased a rickety, 12,000-square-foot blacksmith shop at the corner of Market and First Street. The second floor was so warped, Schaezlein recalls, "it looked like a roller coaster."

They renovated the building themselves. Each fall, they would bring in tons of ice to nearby Gore Park and stage a cross-country ski demo day. The store and manufacturing remained there until 1989, when the store was moved to Town & Country Village (now Santana Row) and manufacturing out to a warehouse on Monterey Road.

### THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Today, Western employs 35 people, including about 28 sewers, who work in a 12,000-square-foot facility on South Fifth Street, near the site of their fondly remembered downtown store. They plan to be there for at least the next five years.

But being one of those endangered species that still produce goods stateside has its challenges. For one, there are hardly any suppliers left to buy material from. "Gradually we're having to push prices up," Schaezlein says. "All our raw material now comes from offshore. Most of our fabric now comes from Japan and we've bought Gore-Tex from Hong Kong for the last 15 years."

Schaezlein's passion for the outdoors runs in his genes. His grandfather loved to fish and hunt and mine in the Sierra Nevada. In the 1880s, he invested in a couple of gold and silver mines and homesteaded 160 acres outside what would become Yosemite National Park, near Cherry Creek, at about 4,000 feet. "My dad was born in 1923 and he spent a lot of time up there in the spring and summer — fishing, hiking, horsepacking," Schaezlein says. "He passed his love for the mountains on to me."

Schaezlein, 58, still loves to get out to surf, fish, hike and play tennis and volleyball, but with two teenage boys involved in high school sports his own activities often take a backseat. Potentially, one of his sons may want to enter the business. But he knows that it's easy to veer off your predetermined path. After all, he was a math major and computer science minor at San Jose State and planned to become a teacher when he fell into manufacturing outdoor gear.

A teacher? Many a mountaineer who have depended on Western's bags would shiver at the thought. **ASJ**