



industry

FROM THE LATE 1950s TO 1970s, A NEW GROUP OF INDUSTRY PIONEERS MADE THEIR MARK ON OUTDOOR RETAIL AND MANUFACTURING.

Inspired by the post-World War II generation of trailblazing outdoor gear and apparel creators, a new pool of design, manufacturing and retail talent emerged between the late 1950s and late 1970s. To a person, this second generation of pioneers strove to create unique gear and make the public more aware of the joy of outdoor pursuits. Either by coincidence or luck, their work was aided by three important national developments.

Early in his term in office, President John Kennedy encouraged the American public to get outdoors and recreate for good health and to do it with "viggah." His remarks sparked a growing interest in recreation that was further enhanced by the second development—the successful American ascent of Mount Everest in 1963. Suddenly, a majority of Americans were aware of climbing and expeditions, both of which were previously considered things only Europeans engaged in.

The last development was a revolution of sorts that started in Eugene, Ore., but would quickly become a nationwide sensation. Initially fostered by University of Oregon track coach Bill Bowerman and later by writer and running guru Jim Fixx, it was the running—or, as Bowerman preferred to call it, jogging—movement. In a short time, thousands of Americans were out running, and as a result, many of them discovered backpacking, hiking and other outdoor pursuits as alternatives to stay fit.

Against this background, the market for outdoor gear and apparel started to grow and foster a new set of movers and shakers.

DON DOUGLASS

As a graduate student in business economics at California's Claremont Graduate University in 1970, Don Douglass' thesis analyzed REI's mail-order business model. In his analysis, he found two things that intrigued him: "First, was the fact that

their largest base of customers was in Southern California," he said. "Second, was the fact that people who bought from REI would prefer to try on gear, especially packs and boots, before buying it."

With his findings and MBA in hand, Douglass raised the capital to start Wilderness Group Inc. (WGI) in 1970, and then opened The Backpacker's Shop in Claremont, Calif. Later, he opened two more Southern California stores, one in Santa Ana and one in Pasadena.

Apart from retail, WGI started a pack company called Alpenlite. "Dick Kely couldn't open more dealers because he couldn't build packs fast enough," Douglass recalled. "So I said, 'Hell, we can build a great pack,' and we did."

Around the same time, the first urethane-coated nylon fabric came onto the market and Alpenlite ended up using it in all its pack bags. But it wasn't the waterproofness that made Alpenlite backpacks famous. It was the hip belts. "We used big, padded waist belts, and the company slogan was: 'Let your hips shoulder your load.'"

Alpenlite packs were hot sellers in the '70s. At one point, kit maker Frostline alone was selling thousands of Alpenlite backpacks in kit form, and Sierra Designs created a special pack bag for the Alpenlite pack frames it sold at its retail shops.

With the retail and the manufacturing businesses humming along, Douglass announced to his partners that if sales reached \$1 million, he and his wife, Reanne, would take a leave of absence and sail around the world. The partners chuckled, but within two years of starting WGI, sales hit the \$1 million mark, the couple purchased a 42-foot sail-

boat, and they were off.

Their voyage started well, but 800 miles west-northwest of Cape Horn, the boat was overturned by a giant wave. When nothing was heard from the couple, they were presumed dead. But 42 days later, they arrived on the southern coast of Chile, both they and their boat badly battered.

Despite the harrowing experience, their voyage was aborted not so much because of the sailing conditions but because



PHOTO COURTESY OF DON DOUGLASS

Trailblazers

Part II

BY BOB WOODWARD

Douglass had to come back to take over WGI, which was struggling under a temporary CEO's leadership. "I came back and immediately got the company (now all of it officially under the Alpenlite name) into book bags, which were a huge hit for us, and then into bicycle touring bags under the Kangaroo label."

Not one to stand still, Douglass loved any new challenge and started exploring other endeavors. While Alpenlite moved along, the Douglasses decided to write a book about their fateful sailing journey, each offering an individual point of view. Rather than bow to publisher pressure for a macho-driven tale, the couple formed their own publishing company and printed "Cape Horn: One Man's Dream, One Woman's Nightmare."

Busy and interested in so many diverse outdoor recreation opportunities and with a growing publishing business, Douglass retired from the outdoor business in the mid-1980s.

GEORGE MARKS

While studying French at then-San Francisco State College, George Marks became friends with a close-knit group of people who were into mountaineering, backpacking and rock climbing.

"Through that group," he recalled, "I met many who would go on to become the super stars of the industry—Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard, Allen Steck, the Long brothers and George Rudolf to mention but a few."

However, being part of the rather small outdoor industry of the time held no interest for Marks. His passion was language, and as soon as he graduated college in 1957, he went to France to work at the Lycee de Garcons in Thionville, then off to work in Germany. During his three years in Europe, he also stayed active, ski touring, climbing and doing other outdoor activities.

"After my return in the fall of 1960, I took a job at the Ski Hut in Berkeley working for Allen Steck, who was manager of the retail store at the time."

Soon adventure called, and thanks to the Long brothers, Marks became the logistics officer for the U.S. Antarctic Research Programs for a National Science Foundation funded project in McMurdo, Antarctica.

"During my two years at McMurdo," Marks said, "I gained invaluable experience in how to cope with low temperatures by honing my skills at designing tents and outerwear."

Back from Antarctica in 1963, Marks returned to The Ski Hut where he went to work at the retailer's Trailwise gear manufacturing enterprise. There, he met Bob Swanson who was in charge of The Ski Hut's mail-order operations.

"Over the next two years, Bob and I became good friends, and with capital provided by our mutual friend, David Buschman, we co-founded Sierra Designs in 1965."

Thus, began a long fruitful relationship with Swanson in the role of general manager and Marks as head designer.

Based in Point Richmond, Calif., just west of Berkeley, Marks and Swanson had a small retail operation, a mail-order catalog, and they also made sleeping bags under contract for the likes of The North Face.

Small in size but large in customer satisfaction, Sierra Designs gained a solid reputation for products like the bombproof Glacier tent and the 100, 200 and 300 sleeping bags.

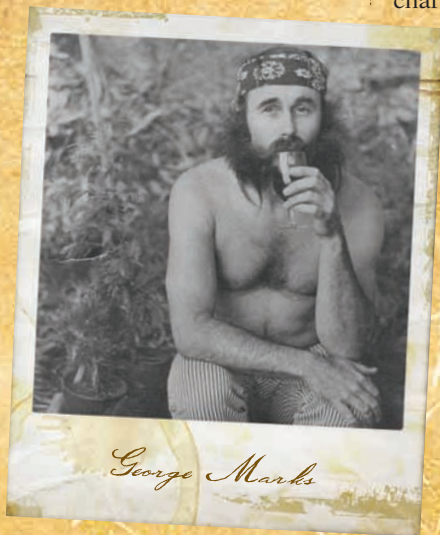
The business grew to the extent that it required additional space to accommodate more seamstresses and a larger retail presence. With the move to an old paint company warehouse at Fourth and Addison streets in Berkeley, Sierra Designs' business flourished due in no small part to the runaway popularity of the company's 60/40 Mountain Parka and expanded wholesale operations.

The company doubled in size for several years, and various large companies came courting. After some consideration, Marks and Swanson decided to sell to the CML Group in 1971. CML was a big conglomerate of the time and had Kelty as part of its growing portfolio of companies.

Marks continued to work at Sierra Designs for almost 12 years before leaving, as he put it, "at CML's invitation," in the fall of 1984. "Life there had become less than enchanting as all creativity had just about dried up as it was all about 'the bottom line.' I left with no regrets," Marks said.

Out of Sierra Designs, Marks again joined Swanson in a new venture called Walrus Tents. "It was a struggle from the first," Marks said. "There was never enough money, and the market was now crowded with other tent makers, mostly from Asia. We attempted a garment line, but the timing was bad and we could not sell what we had made. It was also the time when domestic manufacturing was no longer feasible."

Walrus was eventually sold to REI, and Swanson said, "(With) nothing left for me in the U.S., I decided to move to China and see if I could put a new life together in the now rapidly developing Chinese economy."



ALLEN STECK

In the early 1940s, 16-year-old Allen Steck and his brother, George, headed from their home in Oakland, Calif., to the Sierra to go climbing. Without any hardware and unroped, the two lads made what became the first ascent of the northwest ridge of Mount Maclure. The event turned Steck into a mountaineer for life.

Following a stint in the Navy during World War II, Steck said in a 1991 interview, "I slipped into the climbing scene." Slipped as in making climbs in the Sierra, Italy's Dolomites, the French Alps and the third ascent (first north face ascent) of Canada's Mount Waddington.

With his climbing travels at an end, Steck returned to the San Francisco Bay area and enrolled in the Graduate Language School of UC Berkeley to study German. His idea was to teach the language when he graduated, but gradually grew disenchanted with the idea. Instead, he headed down University Avenue from campus to take a job on the sales floor of The Ski Hut in 1952.

By 1953, he was the store manager and then moved on to the Trailwise manufacturing side of the business. "I was interested in the designing and making of things," he said. Among his pet projects was the breakthrough Slimline sleeping bag design.

Outside of work, Steck continued a prolific climbing career including a 1954 expedition to Makalu, a 1963 first ascent of the south face of the Clyde Minaret, and a 1965 first ascent of the Hummingbird Ridge on Mount Logan.

"I still consider the Logan climb the finest one I ever did," Steck said in 1991. "I wonder how we ever managed to succeed where so many others had failed."

There were other climbs to come, including the 1966 third ascent of El Capitan's Salathe Wall with Steve Roper and Dick Long.

A year later, at 40 years old, Steck co-founded and edited, with Roper, the first edition of *Ascent*, a stylish, beautifully illustrated, literary climbing magazine that would flourish for close to three decades.

In 1969, Steck's long interest in the far reaches of the world led him into a partnership with Leo LeBon in a new venture called Mountain Travel, America's first true adventure travel company. Then, in 1972, he co-authored the book "Wilderness Skiing" with Lito Tejeda-Flores and authored "Fifty Classic Climbs in North America" in 1979.

MIC MEAD

After earning a degree in forestry from Purdue University, Indiana native Mic Mead headed west to California in 1955 to fulfill a two-year obligation as a Navy officer. "Thus began," said Mead, "a 40-year stay in San Diego."

That four-decade stint saw him migrate into the business of making and selling outdoor gear. "I'd always wanted to own my own business, and after getting out of the Navy, I started by designing and building houses, then adding a carving business."

Along the way, he became involved with an Explorer Scout troop whose leadership was keen on making 16 mm adventure films. They called their film-making enterprise "Adventure 16."

"Soon," Mead recalled, "the troop started making their own gear and selling it out of a garage close by my carving shop." Among the eager gear-making young scouts was one named Wayne Gregory who would later make a name for himself in the outdoor business.

In 1968, a Girl Scout troop brought a tent made by the scouts to A-16 to get poles. After much alteration and the addition of arrow shaft poles, the result was what Mead contends is the first crossed pole dome tent to come to market.

Two years later, Mead financed and incorporated A-16. "It was a manufacturing operation making tents, 800-fill down sleeping bags, packs and some accessories, like the first net-front, see-through ditty bags."

A-16 eventually branched out into more retail locations in 1972, around the same time that Mead tried to save sleeping bag manufacturer Snow Lion from bankruptcy. "My banker said not to do it," Mead said, "so I founded Black Ice in Reno with Peter Benjamin as a partner and Bill Simon as our off-shore contractor." (Simon was founder of Snow Lion and later the owner and CEO of The North Face.)

Through the short-lived Black Ice venture, Mead came to own the Granite Stairway Mountaineering retail store in the San Fernando Valley as well as its wholesale division, while steadily growing A-16 and adding stores.

BILL FORREST

Where and how he was raised are the two most significant factors that influenced Bill Forrest's future as a climber and innovator of climbing equipment.

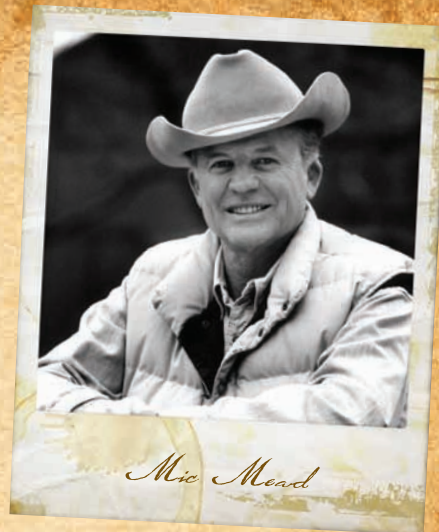
"When I was seven, my family moved from California to Aurora, Colorado, where I ran a trap line and hunted right out our back door," Forrest said. "Come summers, my dad, who surveyed for the BLM, would take the family to the mountains, and I hiked the trails and wandered around the woods every summer for years."

One of those summers, a BLM employee friend of his father taught Forrest and his sister how to climb. Later, at age 12, he would climb Long's Peak with his Boy Scout troop.

The family moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, where Forrest finished high school and was about to go off to college on a basketball scholarship when he decided to join the Army. "I wanted to travel abroad," he said, "and I was shipped off to Bamberg, Germany, which turned out to be a hotbed of rock climbing."

There, along with a friend he'd climbed with in Salt Lake City, Forrest started climbing in the Klettergärten with abandon. "It was a way to put the Army life out of my mind," he explained.

When he got out of the Army and returned home, Forrest was



Mic Mead

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIC MEAD



Allen Steck

PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM LAWYER

a strong lead climber with a full rack of gear. His next stop was Arizona State University for a degree in English, as well as climbing with partner Gary Garbert on “anything local that was big and steep.” Upon graduating—and tired of beating through the Arizona cactus and brush to get to climbs—Forrest spotted a want ad seeking climbing instructors for the Colorado Outward Bound program. Soon, he was back in Colorado where he teamed up with Yosemite climbing legend Glen Denny.

“Glen and I taught together, and in our spare time did some epic climbs like the north face of Crestone Needle unroped,” Forrest said. They also attempted the Diamond route on Long Peak, but had to rap off. That climb got Forrest intrigued with big wall climbing, and he eventually made six successful climbs of the

Diamond, including the first solo.

But one climb kept eluding him. It was the east face of Babo Quivari in Arizona. “I finally hacked a route to the base of the climb, found a water source in a cave at its base and made the first ascent with George Hurley. While on the climb, I grew concerned about the problems of sorting out gear. So I thought about what to do and came up with the idea for the Pin Bin, a metal loop with a spring-loaded mechanism that

made it easy to organize gear and get it on and off easily.”

In 1968, Forrest rented a big house in Denver where he lived and made Pin Bins. He rented out rooms to climbers and worked the graveyard shift at a truck loading dock to keep financially afloat.

From these humble beginnings, Forrest Mountaineering was incorporated. The company had one sewing machine, which was soon put to use making harnesses, which were best sellers for years. Forrest also ventured into ice hammers, producing the first hammer with interchangeable picks, and the first ice axe with an aluminum shaft and a stamped chrome-moly head.

JIM WHITTAKER

Though Jim Whittaker became famous as a member of the first American team to summit Mount Everest in 1963, longtime members of the outdoor community also know him for his years as a retailer.

As a young man, Whittaker and his twin brother Lou were active in the Boy Scouts and eventually became members in an Explorer Scout climbing group. Climbing came easily to the twins, and soon they established quite a reputation in Northwest climbing circles. In 1948 they were asked to help run the guide service on Mount Rainier, and a year later they were running it by themselves.

During his winters off from guiding on Mount Rainier, Whittaker attended college and sold ski gear. With the outbreak of the Korean War, he and his brother were drafted into the Army and sent to a Signal Corps detachment in California. From

there, they transferred to the Army’s Mountain and Cold Weather command at Camp Hale, Colo.

Discharged from the Army in 1954, the twins went back to guiding on Rainier. Come winter, Whittaker worked as a ski gear rep for Seattle retailer and importer Osborn and Ulland. Then in 1955, REI founder Lloyd Anderson came calling and asked Whittaker to head up REI’s first retail store.

“It was too good to pass up,” he recalled in a 1991 interview. “What a job. I was the only one in the place. I opened the store, stocked the shelves, talked with customers, rang up sales, cleaned the place, locked up and made the bank deposit.”

Ironically, the first REI store was located over a restaurant. “Every day I’d get calls from people asking where the store was. I’d ask them where they were calling from and many would say, ‘The Green Apple Pie Restaurant.’ Then I’d bang my foot on the floor and say, ‘That’s where I am, upstairs.’”

As sales grew, he said, “our traditional clientele of doctors and lawyers remained, but there were more students coming in.”

Sales totaled \$80,000 during Whittaker’s first year running the store, and continued to move upward for the next four years during which Whittaker remained REI’s solo retail act. In 1960, he hired Gary Rose to fill in for him while he took a leave of absence to participate in an expedition to Mount McKinley.

He returned to a flooded REI warehouse, the result of a broken Seattle Water Department main. Restitution was made to the tune of \$65,000.

“That check kept us going,”

Whittaker indicated years later. “If we hadn’t received it, we would have been out of business.”

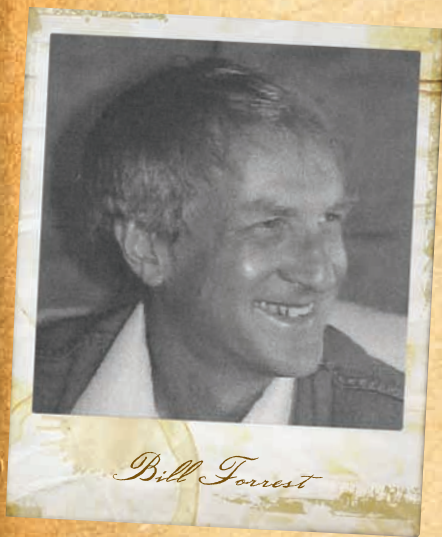
But there were other factors that played into the co-op’s continuation in business—like Whittaker’s growing fame as the first American to summit Mount Everest. While modest about the affect of that climb on REI and its sales, Whittaker did finally admit, “The press coverage sure helped.”

Following on the Everest coverage, REI sales and membership numbers soared. “Word-of-mouth put us on the map and people came to know us for good prices, hard-to-find merchandise and the annual dividend.”

By 1979, sales had grown to \$46 million, and Whittaker found himself, “shuffling papers in my office nine hours a day and thinking: ‘This operation is getting way too big.’” He left REI that year.

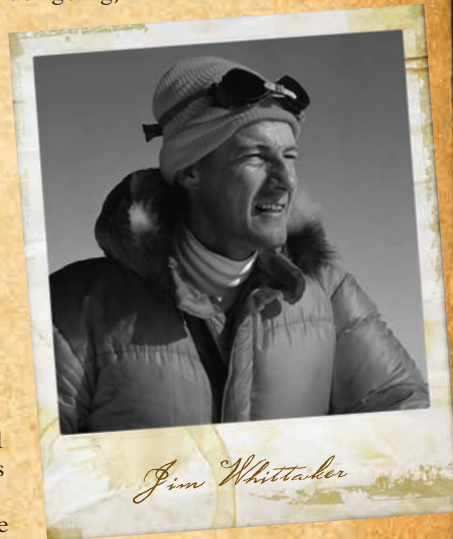
YVON CHOUINARD

Of all the second-generation outdoor industry trailblazers, the most visible and best known today is Yvon Chouinard. As an advocate for the environment, adventurer, author, pioneer in the making and marketing of climbing and outdoor goods, and one of the most environmentally concerned members of the outdoor manufacturing community, Chouinard remains as



Bill Forrest

PHOTO COURTESY OF BILL FORREST



Jim Whittaker

PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC / WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD

vibrant a force today as he has been for three decades.

Already known in American climbing circles, Maine native Chouinard started making pitons for Yosemite big wall climbing in 1957 on a secondhand coal-fired forge. These pitons would play a key role in his climbing efforts, like the second ascent of the Nose on El Capitan in 1960, and the first ascent, with Royal Robbins, Tom Frost and Chuck Pratt, of the North American Wall on El Capitan in 1964.

In 1966, Chouinard and Frost became partners in Chouinard Equipment in Ventura, Calif. They continued to make pitons and other rock climbing hardware, but soon became interested in ice climbing and revolutionized ice climbing tools.

1970 proved a turning point for both Chouinard and his burgeoning business enterprise. On a visit to Scotland, he took a liking to sturdy cotton rugby shirts for climbing and decided to import them to the United States for sale. On his return home, Chouinard opened the Great Pacific Iron Works store in Ventura.

Apart from getting into retail, Chouinard was concerned by the damage pitons were causing to Yosemite's rock walls and started producing a line of chockstones that would eventually include hexentrics and stoppers.

And as important as Chouinard's entrance into retail and clean climbing were, it was the issuing of the 1972 Great Pacific Iron Works catalog that would have the most significant and long-lasting affect on his business and on the American outdoor market. The catalog was considered a work of art, literate in tone. Doug Robinson's "Clean Climbing" essay set the tone for climbing ethics for years to come.

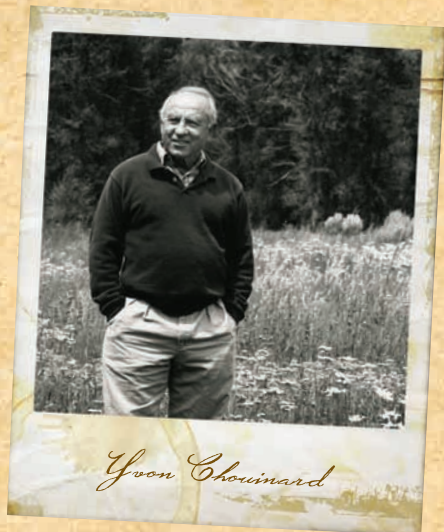
"This was our first 'call to action' to our friends and customers," Chouinard said, adding, "Today, we still have calls to action in our catalogs and always aim to give people a way to personally make a difference in the environment. If we see a problem in the environment, and there are plenty, we give specific actions that our customers can do to become involved in the solution."

Patagonia was incorporated in 1973 and moved to a remodeled slaughterhouse in Ventura. Patagonia's unique product offerings included Foamback raingear, Stand-Up shorts and the Ultima Thule pack. Two years later, the second Great Pacific Iron Works catalog was issued featuring a pile jacket. A year later, spring sportswear was added and company sales passed the \$2 million mark.

And while his name was well known in the climbing and outdoor communities, he was virtually unknown to many Americans—until a New Yorker magazine profile of Chouinard appeared in 1977.

Now with more visibility nationwide, the third Great Pacific Ironworks catalog, printed in 1978, featured soft fleece garments. Successive years brought unique apparel products like Bunting, polypropylene base garments, BorgLite pile jackets and pants, and Patagonia's first kids' products.

Sales grew to \$5 million by 1980, and in 1981, Patagonia and Chouinard Equipment were incorporated within Great Pacific Iron Works. 1982 saw the first printing of the Patagonia catalog and the rest is, for the sake of brevity, history.



BOB SWANSON

During the summer of his final year at San Francisco State College in 1961, Bob Swanson worked in the Central Coast town of Big Sur, Calif., when he got interested in kayaking along California's coastline. "That," he said, "somehow led to lots of hiking around Big Sur and an interest in the mountains."

After buying a French-made rucksack, Swanson headed off on his first-ever trip to California's Sierra. "Having been raised in Philadelphia," he recalled with a laugh, "I really didn't know there were mountains like the Sierra."

Despite his love of the big mountains, he headed back to Big Sur to work at Nepenthe, arguably the hippest restaurant in the United States at the time serving artists, writers, musicians and beatnik poseurs.

"In 1962, I left California and drove to Boulder, Colorado, and I started knocking on doors in search of work." He landed a job at LeRoy and Alice Holubar's small outdoor shop. Ten months later, he headed to Berkeley where he got a job at The Ski Hut/Trailwise running the mail-order operations.

There, he met George Marks, and in 1965, they founded Sierra Designs. "We were both interested in the mountains and in climbing and backpacking, and making gear for those activities seemed like a happening business."

Out of a small building in Point Richmond, Calif., Swanson and Marks handled every single aspect of their burgeoning business together. "I came up with the design concepts as I was more conversant with the marketplace and George executed them. Slowly, I evolved into the business person in our enterprise," Swanson said.

From the start, Sierra Designs (a name Swanson came up with) was noted for its tents and down products, including jackets, parkas and sleeping bags.

The business grew and Sierra Designs moved from Point Richmond to Berkeley in 1968. With the change of address and expanded sales came some of the outdoor industry's most interesting catalogs, featuring the Bodie, Calif., ghost town, the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island, and watercolors and sketches by a top California artist.

All this called attention to Sierra Designs, and large corporate suitors came calling. "We could have sold to Parker Pen for cash," Swanson said, "but we decided to go with CML mainly because of who they owned at the time—Kelty, Hood Sails, Boston Whaler, among others—and the prospect of getting rich via stock options."

Unfortunately, they didn't get rich, and after four years and growing acrimony with the CML operations people, Swanson left Sierra Designs in 1979.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATAGONIA. MEREDITH OGILBY

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