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# industry

## PAYING HOMAGE TO THE EARLY PIONEERS WHO PAVED THE WAY FOR THE OUTDOOR INDUSTRY'S FORMATION.

Like so many great enterprises, the outdoor industry rose from humble origins, growing slowly as Americans became more interested in being in the outdoors to camp, hike or ski. And ironically, had it not been for World War II, outdoor sports and recreational activities might not have flourished as they have.

The war prompted the formation of the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division, a unit that exposed men to skiing, climbing and living outdoors. After the war, the skills some vets of the 10th Mountain Division used to survive in battle were applied to help shape the beginnings of America's ski and outdoor industries.

Joining those active 10th Mountain vets outdoors were thousands of other GIs and war-weary citizens who sought solace in the mountains and backcountry. The more time they spent outdoors, the more they started needing better gear and apparel. And they went looking for it.

### GEORGE RUDOLF: THE SKI HUT, TRAILWISE AND DONNER MOUNTAIN

Among those who supplied the growing number of outdoor enthusiasts early on was George Rudolf, arguably the father of the modern outdoor industry.

In 1935, schoolteacher Rudolf and his regular skiing buddy, engineer Phillip Von Lubkin, opened a small ski shop in Berkeley, Calif. They called it The Ski Hut and it cost them \$750 to open the doors, albeit with limited business hours since the two men kept their day jobs.

At the time, California's Sierra Mountains were a popular spot for ski mountaineering, an activity Rudolf described as, "touring out to the neighboring peaks and, after lunch, making one glorious run back to the lodge." To satisfy skiers' demands, Rudolf and Von Lubkin started importing gear from Europe.

Hoping to expand their customer base, the two men approached the Southern Pacific Railroad with the idea of

selling ski gear on the regular weekend ski trains from the San Francisco Bay area to Sierra ski areas.

The plan was approved and as their Southern Pacific ski train sales flourished, rival Western Pacific Railroad asked them to start selling on its ski trains, as well.

By 1941, business was so good that Rudolf quit teaching and devoted all his time to The Ski Hut. Ironically, the United States declared war a few months later, and Von Lubkin was whisked off to Washington, D.C., to work in the Pentagon, while Rudolf stayed close to home working at the Alameda shipyard south of Oakland, Calif. The Ski Hut was shuttered.

The two men re-opened The Ski Hut postwar in 1946. A year later, Von Lubkin was paralyzed in a skiing accident causing Rudolf to take over complete control of the store.

In a 1991 interview, Rudolf recalled those early days: "The late '40s and early '50s was a very creative period. Gerry Cunningham, Alice and LeRoy Holubar, Dick Kelty and Eddie Bauer—all these people were working on gear. And all kinds of consumers wanted to get into the mountains after the war."

During the early '50s, The Ski Hut retail store became a fixture on Berkeley's University Avenue and expanded its offerings to include sleeping bags made to the company's specifications by Thomas Black and Company of Scotland.

Importing sleeping bags ended when Rudolf formed Trailwise, his own domestic sleeping bag, tent and apparel manufacturing company. Among many Trailwise landmark products was the ultra-slim, ultra-light and warm Slimline down sleeping bag.

Domestic production in hand, Rudolf turned to importing and formed Donner Mountain Company to bring in European-made gear and apparel. Among the brands the company made famous in the United States market was the Italian-made Pivetta boots. Years later, Donner Mountain would produce boots and shoes abroad under its own label including some of the first boots to use Gore-Tex linings.

Over the years, Rudolf's various enterprises served as the training ground for many individuals who would become the



*George Rudolf*

# Trailblazers

BY BOB WOODWARD

second-generation leaders of the outdoor industry. Those people included Bob Swanson, George Marks, Peter Noone, Kate Larramendy, John Schelling and Allen Steck.

## GERRY

Just as George Rudolf's trailblazing career as a retailer, importer and manufacturer was starting in 1935, so too was the design and manufacturing career of Gerry Cunningham, a continent away in New York state.

"I was in high school, an avid skier, and unhappy with the way an ordinary rucksack swung around on my back when I skied," Cunningham said. "So I designed a nice flat pack that would stay close to the body."

Next, he started making and selling climbing skins and was planning to become a full-time designer and maker of ski gear when the United States entered World War II.

"I was fortunate enough to serve in the 10th Mountain Division. I used to lie in my little old mountain tent designing equipment with my buddy Bob Schwartz to pass the time."

At war's end, Cunningham was back in Utica, N.Y., with his wife, Ann, making rucksacks and climbing packs and writing a regular column for the National Ski Patrol magazine. "In return, I asked for their mailing list," he said. Armed with that list and later with the lists from every mountaineering club in the United States, the Cunninghams went into the mail-order business as Gerry.

By 1946, Gerry's mailing list had grown to 10,000 names, and the Cunninghams moved operations to Boulder, Colo.

Thirteen years in Boulder went by before Dale Johnson (founder of the Frostline kit business) became the Cunninghams' partner in 1959, and in 1961 George Lamb (later of Alp Sport, Alpine Designs and Camp 7 fame) joined Gerry to oversee sewing operations.

By the time Lamb arrived, Gerry had two Boulder stores and a San Francisco store to complement the thriving mail-order business. The company's hottest product was the Kiddie Carrier, the first modern infant/child-carrying pack.

Following the Kiddie Carrier's success came the popular

CWD (controlled weight distribution) pack in 1963 and the roomy Camponaire backpacking tent in 1966.

Looking back on the '50s and '60s, Cunningham once said, "This was the golden era. Ann and I traveled all over the country and tested our gear on bike trips, canoe trips, horseback trips, etc. The only reason I went into business in the first place was because nobody was interested in my stuff except the people who used gear."

## HOLUBAR

And the people who used gear were beating a path to the door of another Boulder, Colo., resident, LeRoy Holubar, who, along with his wife, Alice, had started a small gear company out of the basement of their home.

The Holubars went into business in 1947, as LeRoy once told us, "to supplement my grand \$150 per month teaching salary from the University of Colorado" where he taught math for 30 years.

Active in the Colorado Mountain Club during the war, the Holubars got their start in business selling surplus Army gear to club members at the end of the war. Eventually that led to importing gear from Europe, including the much sought-after Molitor ski boots and Kronhoffer climbing boots.

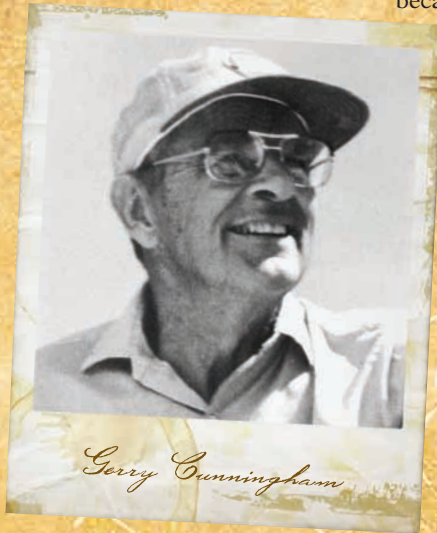
Eventually their boot business became a bit overwhelming, and the Holubars decided to take a step back and branch out into

making tents, sleeping bags and packs.

"Alice got interested in sleeping bags," Holubar noted in an interview late in his life. "She took some of the new sailcloth that had come on the market and made bags with the baffles running horizontally instead of lengthwise. She stitched these baffles in, not through, the bag. She followed the same design with the jackets."

Holubar's down bags and jackets set the construction standard of the day and brought in a huge order from the Arctic Institute of North America, a move that prompted Holubar "to get my sales license and go into business for real."

The Holubars eventually moved operations from the base-



*Gerry Cunningham*



*LeRoy & Alice Holubar*

ment of their home to a Boulder storefront in 1962. LeRoy then quit teaching, and he and Alice devoted all their energies to the business until they sold it in 1968.

### ALP SPORT

As the Holubars were winding down ownership of their business, another member of the group of Boulder outdoor pioneers of the '50s and '60s, designer and sewing ace George Lamb, was ramping up yet another new outdoor gear and apparel venture.

Lamb's interest in design and manufacturing dated back to childhood when he made a pair of holsters for his new cap pistols. In the process of turning out his first product, he ruined his mother's sewing machine but gained valuable experience.

From shooting cap pistols, Lamb progressed to dreaming about climbing, but there weren't many climbing opportunities for a kid living in Indiana. That changed when his parents died and he went to live with an uncle in Oklahoma and attended summer school at the University of Colorado.

Eventually, he enrolled at the University in 1951. "After three or four years of rock climbing in Colorado," he noted in an interview 15 years ago, "I got more interested in mountaineering. There wasn't any good gear available unless you waited months to get it from overseas, so I started building my own. That's how the first Eiger pack came into being."

Upon graduating from the university, he joined the Army's Mountain Training Command (MTC), which replaced the 10th Mountain Division after the war. "I skied, climbed, instructed.... It was terrific," he told us.

Terrific, but the fun was cut short by a skiing accident that saw him reassigned first to run the craft shop at Fort Carson, Colo., and then to the bigger MTC craft shop at Camp Hale, Colo. At Camp Hale, Lamb used the large craft shop industrial sewing machine to make packs for the Holubars.

Discharged from the Army, he supervised the sewing line at Gerry, but soon became discontent and went back to school on the GI Bill. In his spare time, he started Alp Sport.

"Alp Sport started in 1960, and when I graduated in 1964, I faced the choice of finding a job or making Alp Sport grow. So I gave myself \$75 a week and opened an Alp Sport shop," he said.

Alp Sport's unique products, like the Normal parka, the first down-filled ski parka with no stitches in the smooth outer shell, were immediate successes.

The Normal parka's success got the attention of Massachusetts-based Alps Sportswear who asked Lamb to change his company name. He did. Alpine Designs became his apparel label, and Alp Sport remained as his hardgoods label.

### CAMP 7

After selling his company in 1969 to General Recreation, Lamb stayed on as a consultant but eventually left to form yet another company, Camp 7, in July 1971.

Camp 7 had a meteoric rise, netting \$4 million in sales in its first year in business. Over half of the sales were to the Japanese market, but when that market suddenly dried up, it left Lamb in debt and forced him to close the company down.

Looking back at that time, Lamb noted in 1991 that he still saw a lot of people wearing Alp Sport and Camp 7 down jackets. "We produced great products designed to last a lifetime."



*George Lamb*

### KELTY

Not quite a lifetime but more than a thousand miles west and south of Lamb and Boulder, an outdoor gear revolution had begun in Southern California. Leading the way with inventive new products were several aircraft industry engineers, most notably Dick Kelty.

Kelty worked at Lockheed prior to and during the war. In the 1950s, he began making aluminum pack frames and packsacks at his home. The frames were bent by hand over wood mandrels in Kelty's home garage, while the packsacks were sewn in the family living room by his wife, Nina.

In 1953, Kelty made 29 packs, which were sold to his friends out of his home/store.

By word-of-mouth, sales grew to such an extent that the Keltys opened a small store in Glendale, Calif., and started working with a limited dealer network including Highland Outfitters in Southern California, the Holubar store in Boulder, and Mary King's Gerry store in San Francisco.

All was good except that Dick Kelty didn't like having to put the ends of his pack frame into his pant's back pockets to stabilize his load while hiking. So he attached a plain webbing belt to the frame ends and buckled it across his waist. That stabilized the load and led to his inventing the padded waist belt.

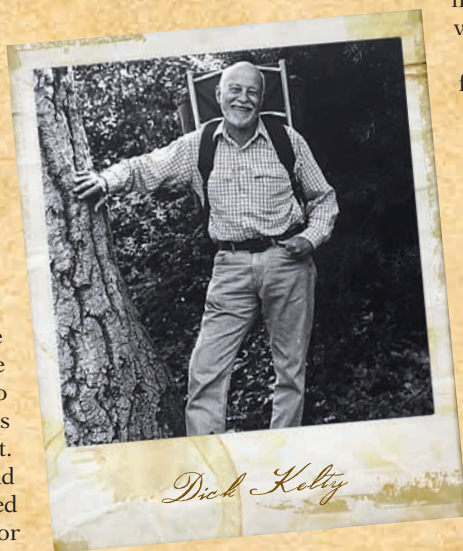
With padded belts, Kelty's A2 and B2 packs became must-haves for avid backpackers. Sales grew and a larger production and retail facility was opened in Glendale.

In 1968, all manufacturing operations were moved to Sun Valley, Calif., where Kelty introduced its famous Tioga pack in 1973. That same year, the Kelty family sold the company to new owners.

### EDDIE BAUER

Under new ownership, Kelty would eventually diversify from packs, even dabbling in making down jackets for a time. And if there's one garment that stands out as a landmark product in the early days of the outdoor business, it is the down jacket originally created by Eddie Bauer.

Bauer's inspiration for the jacket came during an ill-fated fishing trip in 1928 when he came close to dying from hypothermia. Recalling an uncle's story about how his life was saved by wearing a quilted goose-down coat during the Russo-



*Dick Kelty*

PHOTO COURTESY OF KELTY

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Wearing the new Arnuva™ 50 Boa®, Dean Karnazes logs 100s of miles training in the Marin Headlands to prepare for The North Face Endurance 50—where he'll run 50 marathons in 50 states in 50 consecutive days. Photo: Corey Rich. [www.enduranceis.com](http://www.enduranceis.com)



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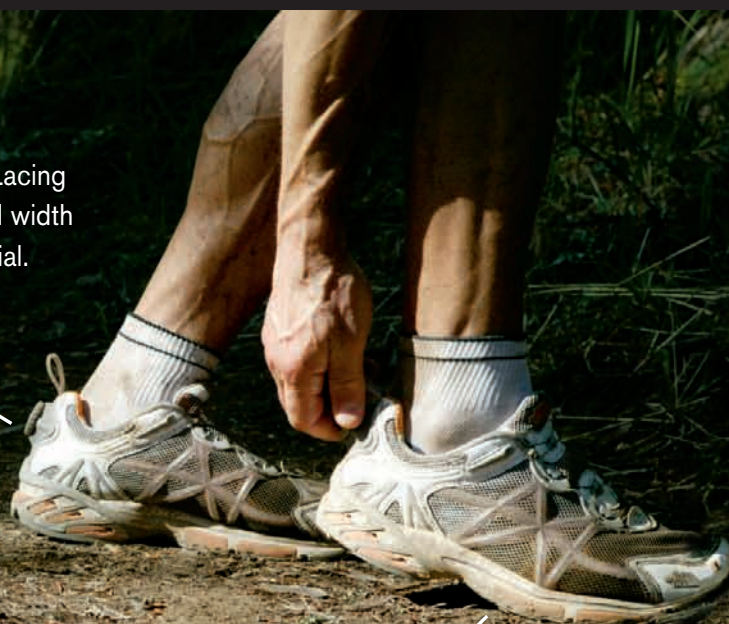
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*Eddie Bauer*

Japanese war, Bauer started tinkering with down jacket designs. In 1936, he unveiled his Skyliner jacket sold exclusively through his family's Seattle general sporting goods store.

During World War II, Bauer received a government contract to make down-filled flight suits, and since his products were the only ones to bear a private label, the brand developed a loyal following among veterans and their families.

Postwar, Bauer was deluged with so many requests for his down jackets that he created a mail-order catalog business in 1946. That business remained family owned until the Eddie Bauer company was purchased in 1971.

### RECREATIONAL EQUIPMENT INC. (REI)

About the same time Bauer unveiled his first down jacket, a Seattle Transit engineer and avid mountaineer, Lloyd Anderson, went shopping for a new ice axe.

The first shop he checked had one for sale for \$20. The Eddie Bauer store had one for \$17.50. Eventually, Anderson found a store that had one for \$7. The only problem was, it had to be imported from Austria.

When the ice axe finally arrived, it actually cost \$12 and it wasn't from Austria but Japan. This upset Anderson so much that he complained about it to anyone who

would listen. One who listened was a Swiss-born climbing partner who gave him a catalog from Sporthaus Peterlongo in Innsbruck, Austria.

Anderson ordered an ice axe from the Austrian retailer, and when it arrived with a landed cost of \$3.50, he and his wife, Mary, started ordering more gear for their climbing friends.

Then, in 1938, the Andersons and 23 climbing friends sat down and formed Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI) for the sole purpose of importing and selling outdoor and climbing gear and apparel. They based their company on the principles of England's Rochdale Cooperative: collective ownership, open membership, competitive pricing and profit distribution through an annual patronage dividend.

### L.L. BEAN

As REI started up in Seattle, L.L. Bean was already a successful hunting and outdoor gear retailer in Freeport, Maine.

The company's namesake, Leon L. Bean, had been orphaned at age 12 and earned his keep through his formative years by doing everything from trapping and hunting to selling soap door-to-door. In his 20s, he worked in his brother's clothing store, but his mindset was on a bigger project—making the world's best hunting boots.

After much experimentation, Bean took some rubber overshoe bottoms, stitched lightweight uppers to them and took them out for a test. They worked perfectly, and Bean's Maine Hunting Shoe was born.

In 1917, the L.L. Bean Maine Hunting Shoe store was opened in Freeport, Maine. Fishing and camping gear and supplies were added to the store's retail mix in 1927. Incorporated in 1934, L.L. Bean would become famous nationwide for its mail-order catalogs and, in 1951, for keeping the Freeport retail store open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.



*L.L. Bean*

### STEPHENSON'S WARMLITE

That turn of retailing genius brings to mind the genius of another type. That of Jack Stephenson, the man many consider the most creative of the early outdoor equipment designers and manufacturers.

Also a former aircraft industry engineer (Hughes in

California), Stephenson, like many of his future gear-making colleagues, got his start making gear in the mid-50s because he didn't like what was on the market.

"Instead of quitting backpacking because of the miserable gear, I took the sewing skills my mother taught me to repair my sailboat sails, got some spinaker fabric and started to work on a pack," he said.

Later, his first attempt at making a sleeping bag so impressed a fellow Hughes employee that he asked to buy it. Stephenson was soon soliciting orders from other employees and friends.

"That was in 1957 when I found myself in business," Stephenson said. His next project belied his uncanny ability to create outside the given design norms of the day. The product was the Backpack, a backpack with an aluminum pack box.

The Backpack led to other creations all made under Stephenson's Warmlite company name. Among his products were several results of forays into perfecting the vapor barrier principle for outdoor gear.

"I discussed the principle with the people at Hughes for years because I had trouble keeping my hands and feet warm when I went skiing. I first used a plastic wrap under my gloves and socks, and later switched to baggies, bread bags and those molded plastic socks you wear over your feet when you paint," he said.

"We had so much luck with the feet and hands that I decided to try other things. A sleeping bag was tops on the list because I'd go to bed cold, close up my down bag and wake up in the middle of the night soaking with perspiration and stuck in a wet bag the rest of the night," he added.

Stephenson's Warmlite products were sold via mail order from his rural home/production facility in New Hampshire. And, like everything else he did, his catalogs ran counter to the norm in that they featured photos of his "naturist" family using Warmlite gear in the buff—



*Lloyd Anderson*  
(far left)

PHOTOS COURTESY OF © EDDIE BAUER COMPANY, REI, AND L.L. BEAN.



an inspiration to many future outdoor adventurers who, as teens, undoubtedly treated Warmlite catalogs with much the same reverence as *Playboy* magazine.

### COLIN FLETCHER

It's never been documented whether or not those Warmlite catalogs inspired other "naturists" to go naked into the backcountry, but it's well known that writer Colin Fletcher's books inspired thousands of people to get out into the wilds with a

pack on their backs.

In the early 1960s, Fletcher started off on a solo backpacking trip from the Mexican border to the Oregon border along California's eastern flank. His adventure was serialized by the San Francisco Chronicle and became the subject of his 1964 book "The Thousand Mile Summer."

Readers marveled not only at Fletcher's intrepid nature in going it alone, but also in how he did it carrying only 55 pounds and 1 ounce of gear, without water, all of which was lovingly displayed in a two-page photo spread in the book.

Adding some spice to the story was Fletcher's background: A former British Army commando, the knockabout Welshman had been a hotel manager, a farmer in Kenya, and a road builder in Rhodesia before catching a cattle boat to the United States. On arriving in New York, he hitchhiked across the country, ending up in British Columbia, Canada, spending a mere \$10 to make the trip. He prospected for gold in British Columbia before moving to the San Francisco Bay area where he became a writer.

Fletcher followed up "The Thousand Mile Summer" with "The Man Who

Walked Through Time" in 1968. It chronicled his extended 1963 hike through the Grand Canyon.

His last major work, "The Complete Walker," became a hiker's and backpacker's bible.

So with good reading matter and plenty of great gear and apparel to make any outdoor adventure more enticing, a generation of outdoor enthusiasts ventured into the backcountry. They, like later generations, owe a debt of gratitude to the trailblazers who had the foresight to know that the gear and apparel they created and sold would help make outdoor recreation an integral part of the American way of life.

*Remembering the history of the outdoor industry, its individuals and its companies is very important. There is strength in history and heritage. SNEWS® has been covering the outdoor industry since 1983. Realizing that no other industry publication is better suited to remembering, correctly, the history of our still relatively young industry, SNEWS® will be publishing regular historical accounts at [www.snewsnet.com](http://www.snewsnet.com).*

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