

with Big Dogs, which later declared bankruptcy and was purchased by new owners. Scott stayed on for another five years in the marketing department.

For the decade after Sierra West, Kelly and a partner ran a sunglass kiosk business, which they sold to the Sunglass Hut chain. Since then, he's been involved in the construction business.

Looking back on his 19 years with Sierra West and the outdoor industry, Kelly said, "It was a tremendous amount of fun. I miss the camaraderie of those days."

As for Scott, when Big Dogs' new owners expanded the company's retail presence, he left and got involved in real estate investing. While on vacation in Kauai nine years ago, he liked what he saw of the local real estate market and shortly thereafter moved his family to the island.

Beyond the outdoor business, Scott and Kelly will always be remembered by industry old-timers and their Santa Barbara friends as being the vanguard of new ideas. Take, for example, their annual beach party during Santa Barbara's famous Fiesta. Scott would mix margaritas in his solar-powered blender (his home was powered by solar energy), while guests relaxed under a giant Kelly-created nylon parawing sunshade supported by 22-foot bamboo poles.

Those were the days.



Bill Nicolai

Two weeks prior to his graduation from the University of Washington in 1968, Bill Nicolai said he dropped out, thinking, "If I didn't graduate, I'd avoid becoming a businessman and, therefore, live an unconventional life."

Free of academia, Nicolai headed to Yosemite to climb. "I was very engaged in climbing, first on rock and later in alpine mountaineering."

"No one in outdoor seemed very interested in Gore-Tex fabrics at the time, but I'd done some research on semi-permeable membranes and was intrigued."

—Bill Nicolai

It was on one of Nicolai's alpine climbing adventures—a 1971 traverse of the Picket Range in Washington's North Cascades National Park—that his life changed forever.

"My climbing partner and I had an A-frame tent that disintegrated on us in a bad storm and we nearly perished," Nicolai said. "I was unemployed at the time, and after that misadventure, I decided to make an expedition tent that would withstand extreme conditions."

Nicolai created the double-walled Omnipotent, which inspired him to found Early Winters in 1972. His partner in his new business venture was Ron Zimmerman, a graduate from the University of Washington who had a degree in English and was interested in graphic design and writing copy.

"Ron urged me to get into catalog sales and direct mail. In 1974, he created a brochure that we handed out to people at the street fairs where we displayed and sold our tents."

Early Winters' big break came a year later when Nicolai met with W.L. Gore & Associates salesperson Joe Tanner. "No one in outdoor seemed very interested in Gore-Tex fabrics at the time, but I'd done some research on semi-permeable membranes and was intrigued. So I got some fabric and made up a tent and it proved to be a winner," Nicolai said.

The tent laid the foundation for a whole line of Gore-Tex items and the first "real" Early Winters catalog in 1976 showing Gore-Tex sleeping bag covers, gaiters, parkas and tents. "Our sales grew exponentially from \$75,000 to \$250,000 to a million over the ensuing years," Nicolai remembered.

The Early Winters catalogs gained a loyal following because they were, in Nicolai's words, "whimsical, fun and irreverent."

By 1984, Early Winters' annual sales were \$16 million and the company employed 200 people. "It was so ironic," Nicolai said with a

laugh, "for a guy who had always considered being in business as such a bad thing."

That year, Nicolai sold Early Winters to Orvis, which in turn would sell the company to the White Group, which would sell it to the present-day owner, Norm Thompson.

Nicolai helped transition Early Winters to Orvis, and then set out on his own with Nicolai and Associates consulting. He worked with mail-order companies, like J. Peterman and Smith and Hawken. In 1992, he formed the Good Catalog Company, achieved \$25 million in sales, and then sold the company to Readers Digest in 1999. Today, he is a consultant with Lenser Multi Channel Marketing.

Aside from consulting, Nicolai became a born-again jock several years ago, focusing his energies into marathon running, Ironman triathlons and endurance bike racing. Today, he said he is now "in the best shape of my life and loving it."



Jim and Greg Thomsen

As children, Jim and Greg Thomsen spent summers with their father in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., where they grew to love the mountains. By 1965, they were backpacking on their own all over California's Sierra.

"In 1967, we both started climbing," Jim said, "and a year later, I was working at Kety Pack making packs as well as working

in the retail shop at the production facility when my wife, Laurie, got this idea to start a program to take kids into the mountains and teach them climbing, backpacking and cross-country skiing. Laurie, Greg and I decided to call the venture Wilderness Experience.” Working through Sport Chalet, their first outings were teaching cross-country skiing.

Two years into the new venture, Greg headed to Europe. “Once there, two guys from UCLA and I bought a Toyota Corolla wagon in Luxembourg and we drove it all the way to Nepal. Along the way, we stopped to climb in the Alps, Bulgaria, Iran and Pakistan. We smuggled money across borders and got caught doing it, but still made it to Nepal.”

In Nepal, the trio decided to climb Mount Everest. “We thought we could do it,” Greg recalled with a laugh, “but when we got above the Khumbu icefall, we realized it was too much to handle without porters or Sherpas, so we packed it in and I went off to wander through some unexplored areas of the country.”

Greg was back home in August 1971 when Jim’s wife, Laurie, died on a solo climb.

“After Laurie’s death, we went on offering classes, while Greg and I jointly managed

The Mountain Store in Tarzana (California),” Jim said. They also started making small accessories, like sleeping bag straps, to sell at the store and to give to their Wilderness Experience guides to use.

Then, late in 1972, the brothers made a trip to Berkeley, Calif., to check out the outdoor gear manufacturing scene. While there, they became friendly with Class 5 owner Justus Bauschinger.

“Justus was a huge influence on me,” Greg said. Jim added, “We figured that if Justus could make gear, so could we. He helped us buy a sewing machine, and a few months later, we rented a 1,000-square-foot space in Chatsworth, California.”

Why Chatsworth? “Because it was near the Stony Point climbing area and we figured we’d be climbing a lot,” Jim said. While Jim ended up with little time on the rock, Greg made it to Stony Point every weekend.

Their first break as gear makers came when Mike Sturm of gear and apparel wholesaler Eiger Mountain Sports asked if they could make gaiters. They said sure, then bought a pair at retail, deconstructed them and re-created their own version.

Then Sturm came to them with another project. “He’d apparently lost the French-

made Millet pack line, and asked us to make an identical line, canvas bags and all,” Greg said. “We did and affixed Wilderness Experience labels to them, which had been made by a label maker in trade for a pair of Pivetta Cortina hiking boots at The Mountain Shop. Suddenly, we had a brand.”

But when Sturm’s Millet shipment mysteriously came through, he told the Thomsons they were out of luck. Rather than throw in the towel, they showed the packs to Don Lauria at his Westridge mountain shop. Jim said, “When he looked at them, he said, ‘Just what the world needs, another pack line.’” Despite that, he took on the line and the packs sold through at Westridge and in every other shop where they were placed. Wilderness Experience was morphing into a real business.

It was about this time that the brothers met with Snowlion boss Bill Simon and former Snowlion sales manager turned independent rep Marty Stilling. “We agreed in principle that Snowlion would make sleeping bags and tents and we’d concentrate on packs and that Marty’s group would sell both lines,” Jim said. (Stilling’s Roundtable rep group is considered the first national outdoor rep group and the first to employ



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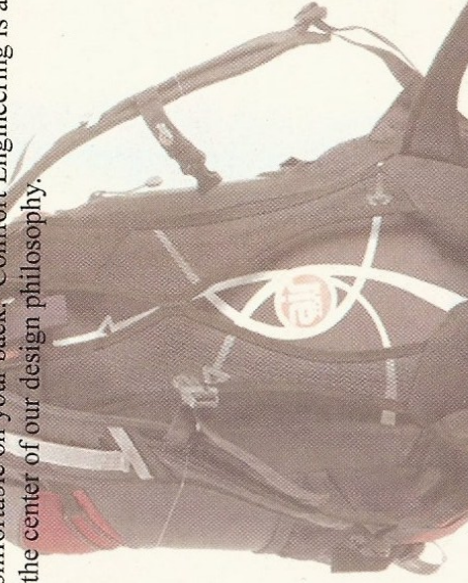
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climbers like John Bragg and Jim Donini as reps.)

Through 1974 and 1975, the pack business grew to the point that Wilderness Experience added the tagline, “We only make backpacks and that’s why we’re the best,” to all its ads and brochures.

Things changed when Snowlion went out of business in 1978, and the Thomsons decided they could make all the products that the Berkeley manufacturer had made. “At first we decided to add all the new products under the Solo brand name, but eventually decided against that,” Jim said.

Not long after expanding the product line, the brothers were approached by W.L. Gore to use its new fabrics, becoming the third outdoor company to use Gore-Tex in apparel.

They also secured an order to do all of L.L. Bean’s Gore-Tex outerwear, but there was a problem. W.L. Gore thought the brothers were a credit risk and wouldn’t sell them the quantity of fabric they needed. So Greg flew to Maine to talk L.L. Bean CEO Leon Gorman into buying the fabric for his company.

“During that visit, Leon and I discussed the possibility of Wilderness Experience opening a production facility in nearby South Freeport,” Greg said. “When I asked him if it would mean more business from Bean if we were located nearby, he said no and I dropped the idea.”

The L.L. Bean order was the first \$1 million order Wilderness Experience received. Not long after that came a big order to make luggage and duffels for Eddie Bauer. That order was followed up with Wilderness Experience purchasing Bellweather’s sleeping bag operations in San Francisco to add a Polarguard fill line to its *down bag offerings*.

By 1980, Wilderness Experience was a dynamic organization with 250 employees and a new 75,000-square-foot production facility in Chatsworth. Greg was off to China as one of the first outdoor manufacturers to check out the possibilities of production there.

“A year later, Jim Donini and I went to China to climb in a very remote area of the country. This was long before the Chinese opened the country to tourism,” Greg said.

With the help of several Price-Waterhouse employees who had been in their climbing classes years before, the brothers decided to float a stock offering in 1982.

“Nike has just gone public with their IPO, and we basically copied the verbiage from their prospectus,” Jim said with a laugh. “By the time the offering came public, we were

Industry Trailblazers - Part I-IV

Curious about outdoor industry pioneers we’ve previously profiled since we began the series in 2006? Take a look at our list. To read any of the published profiles online, go to www.snewsnet.com/history and click on the story or profile of your choice.

Outdoor Summer 2006 - Part I:

Lloyd Anderson (REI)
Eddie Bauer (Eddie Bauer)
L.L. Bean (L.L. Bean)
Gerry Cunningham (Gerry)
Colin Fletcher (“The Complete Walker”)
Leroy and Alice Holubar (Holubar)
Dick Kelty (Kelty)

George Lamb

(Alp Sport, Alpine Designs, Camp 7)

George Rudolf

(The Ski Hut, Trailwise, Donner Mountain)

Jack Stephenson

(Warmlite)

Outdoor Winter 2007 - Part II:

Yvon Chouinard (Patagonia)

Don Douglass (Wilderness Group, The Backpacker’s Shop, Alpenlite)

Bill Forrest (Forrest Mountaineering)

George Marks (Sierra Designs)

Mic Mead (Adventure 16)

Allen Steck (Trailwise, Mountain Travel)

Bob Swanson (Sierra Designs)

Jim Whittaker (REI)

Outdoor Summer 2007 - Part III:

Justus Bauschinger

(Trailwise, The North Face, Class 5)

Dave Chamfler (REI)

Mark Erickson

(The North Face, Erickson Outdoors)

Jack Gilbert (The North Face, Sierra Designs, Mountain Hardwear)

Hap Klopp

(The North Face)

Jeff Lowe (Lowe Alpine Systems, Latok)

Royal Robbins (Royal Robbins)

Skip Yowell (JanSport)

Outdoor Winter 2008 - Part IV:

Greg & Ted Hine

(Hine-Snowbridge, Kirtland, Atan)

Dale Johnson (Frostline)

Gary Kirk & Marcia Briggs

(Caribou Mountaineering)

Dick McGowan (Alpine Hut, Mountain Products, Mountain Travel)

Bill Moss (Moss Tent Works)

Larry Penberthy (Mountain Safety Research)

Bill Simon (Snowlion, Odyssey)

classes in small business and outdoor recreation at California State University, Northridge. He also bought two outdoor shops: one in Northridge, Calif., which was later sold, and the second in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., which was eventually closed.

Greg stayed on at Wilderness Experience until 1986 when he sold his stock in the company to Gary Wennick. (Wennick later founded Global Crossing.) First, he took off to Africa on several casual expeditions before returning to help rep Mel Hetzer with the Reebok running shoe line he was bringing in from England. Then he received a call from Nike boss Phil Knight, asking him to join the ranks at the Oregon company where he helped launch the ACG brand and acted as the company’s director of marketing for apparel.

While Greg was at Nike, Jim tried to wrest control of Wilderness Experience back in a proxy fight. But the attempt failed, and he started to work with Larry Harrison at his Earth Games rep group.

Greg eventually left Nike and founded a company called American Sports Group that launched, among many lines, Heavy Hitters with former NFL football player Ronnie Lott, and also handled sourcing for a multitude of outdoor companies.

In 1994, Jim was hired by Wisconsin-based Downers to consolidate its recently acquired JanSport operations. After VF Corp. purchased JanSport, Jim stayed on and expanded the brand’s presence in Europe and the Far East. He moved to Europe in 1999 to expand the presence of Eastpak (a VF brand) there. Jim also expanded VF’s brand presence in Europe by selling Kipling, JanSport and Eastpak from his office in Belgium.

Greg also did a bit of work with JanSport, designing a new pack (the Big Student) in 1995 to be produced offshore as an experiment. Based on that pack’s quality and its success at retail, JanSport moved all of its pack production to China two years later.

Today, Jim is retired, and he and his wife live on their sailboat spending most of the year sailing European waters. “It’s a dream come true,” he said.

Greg still has American Sports Group, but he recently sold all his stock in its Youngstown Equipment and Mountainsmith brands to Blackstone of Missouri. He and his wife plan to take their 10-year-old daughter out of school for a year to travel around the world. “We’ll spend six months in Asia and six months in Europe. It should be wonderful,” he said. **S**