

Fashion Outlook

Southern exposure

Ruff Hewn designs live up to legend

By Mary Martin Niepold

Thanks to the ingenuity and marketing savvy of two brothers in High Point, N.C., Ruff Hewn has become one of the 1980s' most recognized names in women's and men's sportswear.

Ruff Hewn's story is one of meteoric customer acceptance. The company kicked off in 1981 with a men's collection that comprised two trousers, two shirts and one pair of shorts. Today, Ruff Hewn includes jackets, outerwear and dress shirts.

Along with its women's collection, called Pretty Ruff, the company is sold in more than 3,000 specialty stores in the United States. Another 60 stores in Japan carry it; and Ruff Hewn is strongly anchored in European countries like England, Belgium and Italy. A handful of Caribbean islands like the look as well.

Warren and Jeffrey Rives bought a High Point, N.C., jeans-manufacturing plant in 1977 and dubbed it W&J Rives. The two used the plant to produce garments for Ralph Lauren, Yves Saint Laurent, Oscar de la Renta, Lee, Izod, Gloria Vanderbilt, Jordache and Levi Strauss & Co., among others.

To become cost-effective, the Rives brothers decided to open their own clothing line a few years later. They teamed up with designer Dennis Marchman, who handles the creative and merchandising side of the business.

"Ruff Hewn," says Warren Rives, "is not where we originally intended to go, but it was so blamed good.... Jeff and I literally pulled the plug on the deal three times, and Dennis talked us out of it three times. Finally, we said, this guy is so good that if he can sell us, it's worth a roll of the dice."

What sold was the idea of simply styled classic sportswear — an affordable "country gentleman" look. Ruff Hewn is upward of moderate in price (shirts and trousers range from \$40 to \$80); the clothes are made of all-natural fabrics in cotton, linen or wool, and they stress comfort.

But who needs another classic American sportswear line?

To convince customers that they needed Ruff Hewn instead of someone else, Marchman created a legend.

In a brochure called "The Ruff Life," which was attached to each garment, Marchman penned the life of a heroic adventurer-designer named Barclay Ruffin Hewn — "The Father of True American Wear." As the "legend" had it, Hewn was born on Independence Day in 1885 in New York City, into "a family of great financial, social and political prominence." Hewn's adventures led him to Buckingham Palace, among other places, where he suggested to Queen

Victoria that she change the dress code in British public schools.

Marchman laughs. "I would tell retailers, 'This is a fictional character,' and they'd say, 'Well, we don't want to tell our customers that, because they may know it, but they don't want to know it. They want to know and believe Ruff Hewn may appear in the store one day.'"

"The fact that Ruff Hewn was allowed to become a designer in the American public's mind — and I mean allowed — is a phenomenon," concludes Marchman.

The fictional Hewn may spark customers' curiosity, but the clothes are what ultimately count. Ruff Hewn's designs recall country weekends, a touch of wealth, a sense of fun and adventure — just like their fictional founder.

"America wants to feel good about

itself right now," says Jeffrey Rives. "There's not a lot of good news out there. Ruff Hewn's life makes you feel good because he's a hero, and America's looking for heroes."

Ruff Hewn has headed to Jamaica for its current advertising campaign for the spring/summer collections. The sense of adventure sparks men's bleached chambray shorts and pants,

safari-styled camp shirts, pleated khaki shorts and easy-fitting, high-waisted Hollywood khaki trousers. And when Ruff Hewn decides to update a classic, it offers pineapple-print camp shirts — in linen.

It's precisely this kind of aristocratic low-keyness that keeps the line in stores like Neiman-Marcus, Barneys of New York and Louis of Boston — and stores in Lexington, N.C., and Oxford, Miss.

"Those (smaller) stores are just as important to us because they are the best store in their town," explains Jeffrey Rives. "The company you keep — we were raised that way — is who you are. These stores have been good to us, and we've been good to them, and that's how we'll be here 50 years from now."

The numbers bear out that logic: Ruff Hewn has counted an annual compounded growth rate of 275 percent for each of the seven years it has been in business. It is currently negotiating to open several of its own company-owned and operated stores.

"The original idea," says Warren, "was not to go out there and make a

fashion statement. We wanted something with longevity."

"Also," adds Jeffrey, "if we don't enjoy it, why do it?"

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