

# THE STORY OF COLUMBIA SPORTSWEAR COMPANY

*By Amy Faust for Columbia Sportswear Company*



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FROM ONE MAN'S HAT COMPANY...

to one of the world's largest outerwear manufacturers

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FROM CANVAS AND PLASTIC...

to Gore-Tex and Omni-Tech

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FROM HOUSEWIFE...

to household name

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FROM A FAMILY-RUN BUSINESS...

to a business whose "family" spans five continents

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## IN THE BEGINNING

### The History of Columbia Sportswear

Portland, Oregon, was the destination of Paul and Marie Lamfrom back in 1937, when they fled Germany with their three daughters to escape the Nazis. Settling into American school life, 13 year-old Gertrude was placed in the first grade to learn English, and after just two weeks, she had firmly grasped the language and jumped to her rightful position in the seventh grade. That was the second-to-last time in her life that Gertrude Lamfrom Boyle would be underestimated.

The following year, Paul and Marie Lamfrom bought a small hat distributorship and changed the name to Columbia Hat Company, after the famous river that runs through Portland. Even in a country still struggling its way out of the Great Depression, Paul managed to sell lots of hats, belts, suspenders and other accessories, mostly by the sheer force of his determination and his personality (sound familiar?). He sold enough goods to put Gert and her sisters through college and to lure Gert's new husband Neal Boyle up to Portland to join the family business in 1950.

Frustrated by poor deliveries from suppliers, Paul and Neal decided to take up manufacturing themselves and formed Columbia Sportswear Company. They housed both the distributorship and manufacturing operations in a modest new factory situated on the banks of the Willamette River. When Paul died in 1964, Neal took the helm of the growing company.

Just six years later in 1970, Neal Boyle died suddenly of a heart attack. He left behind three children, an expanding company leaning heavily on loans, and a wife whose only previous experience with finances was her monthly ritual of throwing all the bills across the living room and paying only the one that flew the farthest. Running the family's million-dollar sportswear company might be -- as she soon discovered -- a little different.

Which leads to the final underestimation of Gert. The day after Neal's funeral, the phones at Columbia were ringing off the hook with salesmen and vendors who assumed the company was going out of business. Then the bank called. They were quite concerned when they found out that a "housewife" was going to take control of the company. They summoned Gert in for a meeting, during which she somehow managed to buy herself a little time.

Two years (and minus \$200,000) later, the doubting bankers decided it was time for Gert and her twenty-something son Tim to find a buyer for their company. When Gert sat down with the prospective buyer and realized she'd only make \$1,400 off the sale, she told him, "For that kind of money I'll run the company into the ground myself;" and showed him the door.

## 1938:

The Lamfroms purchase a small wholesale hat business and change the name to Columbia Hat Company.

*Orson Welles' famous  
"War of the Worlds"  
broadcast frightens  
everyone in America,  
except for Gert.*



Things went uphill from there. Gert pledged Columbia's buildings as collateral for loans, appeasing the bankers. She also trimmed the company a bit and Tim started hitting the trade shows. After a few years, profits went up. New products like Gore-Tex jackets flew off the shelves. Gert started modeling for magazine advertisements. The company branched out into other countries. Profits soared. Today, Columbia Sportswear is one of the world's largest outerwear manufacturers and the leading seller of skiwear in America. And one of those doubting bankers sits on the company's board of directors. He doesn't underestimate Gert anymore. Nobody does.

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## LONG BEFORE THE LEISURE SUIT Product Mix

In Oregon, leisurewear has never been anything but outdoor wear. German immigrant Paul Lamfrom caught on to this pretty quickly, selling his fellow Oregonians the kind of clothing that real outdoorspeople would wear. He also understood the importance of selling more than one product, and it's a good thing he did. In the 1960s, when people started dressing more casually, Columbia Hat

### 1954:

Televisions are popping up in living rooms all over America.

*Based on his children's fascination with the TV, Neal Boyle worries about the future of the outdoor apparel business.*



Company had already become Columbia Sportswear and the company was offering not just hats but gloves, jackets, fishing vests and more.

Over the years, Columbia's niche in the apparel industry has broadened as we continue to create innovative, quality outdoor apparel -- including outerwear, sportswear, rugged footwear and related accessories -- for all kinds of people (except for people who never go outside.) Meanwhile, we've maintained our original high standards of quality and affordability in every garment we make. Our footwear collection, for example, began with a one-style experiment: the Bugabootoo. Our careful design and development process made this boot an instant hit, prompting us to expand into a full line of multi-seasonal, multi-use footwear for the entire family.

Essential to this process is input from our sales reps and key customers, with whom we consult before ever introducing a product to the retail floor. And once we create the right product, we back it with a limited lifetime warranty against manufacturing defects, ensuring our customers are always receiving the highest quality products and service. We've even gone a step further by simplifying the buying process for retailers with state-of-the-art technology which allows buyers to place orders electronically.

## INVENTING THE ESSENTIALS

Design Innovations

In 1960, Neal told Gert that he had an idea. While fishing, he noticed he was always reaching into his creel to pull out lures and bait. Why not make a vest with lots of easy access pockets to store all of this gear? He invited his fishing buddies over to the Boyle house and told them to bring every piece of fishing tackle they owned. With Gert stationed at her sewing machine (she was still in housewife mode), the group ultimately created a totally new kind of fishing vest. It was a huge hit and it taught the Boyles two valuable lessons: 1) If it's not out there, design it, and 2) If it's designed by and for real outdoorspeople, then those people will buy it.

*I brought over my tackle boxes and we sat in Gert's sewing room experimenting with different pockets, zippers and snaps. When I wore that first fishing vest, total strangers would come up and ask me where I'd gotten it, they'd never seen anything like it.*

- Bob Labby, fisherman and longtime friend of the Boyles

These basic principles guide Columbia through the continued creation of innovative designs, like our famous Interchange System. We developed this revolutionary concept in 1982 and it has since propelled Columbia to the forefront of the outerwear industry. Our first Interchange jackets were made

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for hunting and featured a weather-proof outer shell and an insulating inner jacket that could be worn together or separately, so that each parka was really three or four garments in one. This product was so popular that we applied the same concept to a ski parka and called it the Bugaboo. And since it's the best-selling ski jacket ever, we can safely say, "the rest is history."

This is the kind of ingenious yet common sense idea that Columbia designers come up with all the time because they understand the needs of outdoor enthusiasts from firsthand experience. Our skiwear designers spend weekends on the slopes grilling strangers on chairlifts, for example. This led to the creation of Radial Sleeves, which provide unrestricted arm movement, and the Radial Venting System, which provides enhanced ventilation. And our groundbreaking Comfort System was conceived for hunters and anglers who were tired of lugging around heavy vests and packs. This design incorporates a neoprene suspension system that alleviates stress and makes the load feel lighter.

## WHAT WE'RE MADE OF

### Sourcing and Manufacturing Standards

In the early 1970s when Columbia was still a fairly small company, Tim Boyle got a phone call from one of his Seattle buyers who had a hot tip: Word was a company in Maryland had invented a fabric that was waterproof AND breathable. Tim had endured enough Oregon rainstorms (staying dry but feeling clammy) to know that this was a pretty big deal. Fortunately, when this company in Maryland learned about Tim's company and its manufacturing standards, they decided that Columbia should be the first company to make parkas out of this new Gore-Tex fabric. We're glad they did, because the resulting product pretty much blew away the old standard for comfort in the outdoors.

Columbia went on to develop its own proprietary waterproof, breathable coating, Omni-Tech, in 1991 and has since become famous as a product innovator with an unparalleled reputation for quality. But to us, the most important part of the equation is value. In order to bring the latest fabric and design technologies to consumers at an affordable price, our manufacturing operation must be comprehensive and quality-driven. To this end, we established a thorough set of Standards and Business Practice Guidelines that apply to our production everywhere in the world, from our only company-owned factory in Chaffee, Missouri, to contract facilities in Taipei, Taiwan.

**1971:**

Pantsuits have become acceptable apparel for women.

*Gert wears the pantsuits (and the pants) at Columbia.*



At Columbia, excellence in manufacturing means more than just making a great product. It also means creating products in safe, ethical working conditions and in an environmentally responsible manner. All of the factories with which we contract in the United States and overseas comply with local labor laws, and we work hard to ensure that the jobs we create offer meaningful benefits and have a positive impact on the local economy. We have offices in Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the United States to monitor our production and to ensure that it is carried out with safety, quality, responsibility and affordability in mind.



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Back when Paul Lamfrom was still running the show, he had a simple rule that helped him sell lots of hats: Do whatever it takes. This often meant that he would walk into a busy store and spontaneously help customers until the the shop owner was free to talk with him. Close relationships with buyers and customers helped keep Columbia Hat Company afloat in the early days and later helped that small company grow into Columbia Sportswear.

Over the years, we've stayed the same in some basic ways. We still believe relationships are vital to our success. Our products are still made with the same standards for quality established in 1938. And although we've graduated from Gert's home sewing machine to state-of-the art software and design systems, our team is still like those fishermen in the Boyles' living room: They're avid outdoor enthusiasts, and they still have to answer to Gert.

