

NORTHWOODS COMMERCE

February/March 2009

Wendell County Marketplace

Perfect Fit

THE NOSTALGIC
JOURNEY
OF THE
STORMY
KROMER CAP

**BOB
JACQUART**
President & CEO,
Jacquart Fabric Products, Inc.

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February/March 2009

The Remarkable Journey OF THE Stormy Kromer

By Timi Eckes

They're not just for hunting, ice fishing and hauling firewood anymore. From the northwoods of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan to the summit of Mount Everest, the Stormy Kromer cap is warming heads around the world, and the momentum shows no signs of slowing anytime soon.

Manufactured in Ironwood, Mich., the Original Stormy Kromer cap has long been a treasured mainstay of Northwoods winter apparel. But the cap's territory isn't limited to hunting cabins and ice shanties. Over the years, Kromers have become part of just about any milestone a person can think of. Like a lovable, eccentric

uncle, the cap is present at weddings, anniversaries, holidays and other gatherings. There are stories of proud fathers plunking Kromers on the heads of their newborns, and of the dearly departed sporting them on the way to their final resting place. And, of course, the Kromer is still the cap of choice for many who work and play outside.

In other words, the venerable wool cap with its trademark ear flaps and downward-tilted brim has nothing short of a cult following. It's turned up in several movies, among them *Death Wish*, *M.A.S.H.* and *Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause*, and in the Macy's

Thanksgiving Day Parade. The cap's story has even been celebrated in children's books, most recently *Stormy's Hat: Just Right for a Railroad Man*, by Eric A. Kimmel.

The Kromer has made a remarkable journey since it first perched on its inventor's head more than a century ago. It all started back in 1903, when George "Stormy" Kromer of Kaukauna, a railroad engineer and former baseball player with a temper (hence the nickname), asked his wife, Ida, to devise a cap that would stay on his head without being blown off. She obliged, taking one of

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State-of-the-art technology helps Jacquart's company keep up with demand. The machine at left, which embroiders logos and designs on some JFP products, is newly installed. At right, the Stormy Kromer name is already embroidered on caps before the pieces are assembled.

Photos by Timi Eckes

PROFILE



“IMAGINE
*working with a
world-class company
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BOB JACQUART •
President and CEO
of Jacquart Fabric Products Inc.

STORMY KROMER MERCANTILE, DIVISION OF JACQUART FABRIC PRODUCTS INC.

Fast FACTS

COMPANY MISSION: “To be a diverse sewing company that can continue to find niches which are profitable and ‘China-proof’ while being a significant employer in Ironwood,” Jacquart says.

Location:
1238 Wall St., Ironwood, Mich.

President and CEO:
Bob Jacquart

**Total number
of employees:** 175

Contact information:
(800) 455-2253
stormykromer.com or jacquarts.com



Kromer caps are put together assembly line fashion, and sized before inspection and shipment. Working steadily, employees produce an average of 300 caps daily. Photos by Timi Eckes

his old baseball caps and modifying it with adjustable earflaps and a brim that was tilted downward so as not to catch the wind. The modified cap caught on among friends and coworkers, demand grew and the Kromers eventually ended up basing their Kromer Cap Company in Milwaukee. In 1965, George Kromer sold his company to Richard Grossman.

Then in 2001, Bob Jacquart, owner of Jacquart Fabric Products Inc. (JFP) in Ironwood, Mich., learned over coffee that Stormy Kromer caps would no longer be made, as Grossman had decided to concentrate on his company’s more profitable line of welding caps. The cap’s place in Northwoods culture wasn’t lost on Jacquart. Neither was the public’s desire for products made in America. Not wanting to see the demise of a Northwoods icon—and because, he says, he “felt that Stormy Kromer could really have an impact on this community”—Jacquart got on the phone with Grossman that very day. He ended up purchasing the rights to the Stormy Kromer cap brand, becoming its sole manufacturer, and making Stormy Kromer Mercantile a division of JFP.

The change in ownership heralded a new era in the history of the humble cap, and Stormy Kromer Mercantile has expanded beyond its namesake’s wildest dreams. When Jacquart bought the company, Original Stormy Kromer caps were produced in only red or black, and about 3,800 of them were being manufactured each year. Today, more than 50,000 Kromer caps are produced annually in a dozen colors and several styles.

Jacquart’s willingness to listen to customer input has played a significant role in the rise of Stormy Kromer Mer-

cantile. One night at a Mercer supper club, he learned from a motorcyclist that many bikers like to wear Kromers to keep their heads warm while riding. A light bulb went on in Jacquart’s head and a brimless version of the Kromer was marketed to Harley-Davidson. Jacquart’s company now manufactures the brimless cap, which has also proven popular with cross-country skiers. It’s now *de rigueur* at cross-country ski events like the American Birkebeiner and the Stormy Kromer Pursuit.

In addition to the caps, Stormy Kromer Mercantile offers several other products, including jackets, shirts and handwear. The company’s market has also grown to include women and children, and an expanded women’s line is on the horizon. Already producing the Ida Kromer cap, a more feminine version of the original Kromer and a hit with women, the company is planning a line of women’s shirts and coats for the fall of 2010.

“We have good growth in all areas of the country,” Jacquart says, “except the East Coast.” He is also talking to distributors in the UK and Japan, and is working to get more representation in Canada. The cap is available online and at stores in almost every state in the US. It can be found at convenience stores in tiny Northwoods communities, in the catalogs of big-name clothing companies like LL Bean and Cabela’s, and even at stores in New York City.

Lindsay Piper, profit center manager for Stormy Kromer Mercantile, says, “We have a *really* fun customer base,” and she cites examples of customers who send in pictures and stories. There’s the Kromer Kap Kulture Klub, for example,

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a hunting camp in Wisconsin, in which the rookie hunters wear red Kromers, while the oldtimers wear black ones. Fans around the world send their stories and photos to the company's Web site, including engaged couples, entire families showing off matching caps and even military personnel stationed in Iraq.

As he gives a tour of the building where Kromer caps are made, Jacquart, himself clad in jeans and a flannel shirt, stops often to chat with employees. Though the atmosphere is relaxed, the activity never stops. Here, dog beds are being prepared for shipment; there, pouches that will hold IV tubes are being made.

"The strength of this company is that we are very, very diverse," Piper says, and she jokes that it seems the list of what JFP produces seems longer than the list of what the company *doesn't* make. Awnings, banners, boat cushions, motorcycle seat covers, truck tarps, duffel bags...a seemingly endless array of products comes from the JFP facility in Ironwood.

Strolling among the workers, materi-

als and machinery, it becomes immediately apparent Piper isn't exaggerating. JFP is comprised of three divisions: the first produces marine canvas products, awnings and tarps. Upholstery services make up the second division. The third is contract sewing as well as production of Stormy Kromer Mercantile outdoor clothing, dog beds and many, many other items. That building alone is 30,000 square feet of nonstop activity. All three divisions total 80,000 square feet.

On average, about 300 Kromer caps are produced daily. Fabric pieces are cut on a laser-guided machine designed to provide maximum efficiency and minimum waste. The pieces are stitched together in assembly line fashion, then the caps are sized and inspected before being shipped out.

Besides a sterling reputation and a hefty bank of goodwill, Jacquart's company also enjoys a low employee turnover rate. "The company really understands how valuable those people are, and they're really appreciated," he says. In fact, he once promised himself that "If we ever employ 100 people, I

will buy steaks for everyone." About 10 years ago, he says, the first prime rib was served.

His journey to president and CEO of Jacquart Fabric Products wasn't really planned. At one time, he studied to be a mechanical engineer. His father owned a sewing repair shop, and the younger Jacquart began working there. Having grown up with relatives who owned small businesses, Bob Jacquart realized he knew a lot about customer service, and the road to a career as a mechanical engineer took a detour. Besides, "I had the job and didn't feel like looking for something else," he admits.

"Right now," Jacquart says, "our company is positioned to be more successful in Ironwood than anywhere else. Imagine working with a world-class company and having everyone at that company have warm, small town values."

Besides those values, these people have what many in other parts of the country don't: jobs. One of the biggest selling points for JFP is that so many of its products are made right in Ironwood. Many of the Stormy Kromer Mercantile

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division's products are also American made, but not all of them. The company has produced shirts and jackets since 2004. Stormy Kromer caps, jackets and deerskin mitts are made in the US; the cotton shirts are imported from India. With wool tariffs being as high as they are, Jacquart explains, it makes more sense to produce the caps and jackets on American soil. As shirts are comprised of more pieces, they're more economically produced overseas.

What advice would he offer to entrepreneurs who wish to offer American-made products? "Understand the unbelievably complex reasons why some stuff works to be made here and some stuff doesn't," he says.

"Our company has figured it out for the sewing industry, and I believe that it would take some time to get that for another industry. It involves personalization, large SKU counts, volume and complexity."

Jacquart credits several things with his company's growth: the Kromer's history and heritage, his staff's passion for learning and for being great at what

they do, and strong small-town values. There are other factors, too: an easy rapport with customers and a strong emphasis on service, a finger on the pulse of the Kromer mystique, a commitment to quality and a willingness to diversify.

Then there's the cheeky marketing campaign (the Ida Kromer cap: "...every bit as rugged and durable as the Original, but just seems a little sweeter when you say, 'I told you so.'"). All have helped create a company that's in the enviable position in which JFP finds itself. Keeping up with all the orders can be a challenge, Piper says, though she admits she's thankful for that particular problem.

Once again displaying a talent for spotting companies that neatly mesh with JFP, Jacquart recently acquired Stone Legacy, a western Wisconsin company which manufactures high-quality protective cases for various products. He cites the purchase as an example of how his company is dealing with the current economy.

"We are continuing to strive to be world-class and making sure we are

great partners in helping our present customers survive," he says.

When Bob Jacquart bought the right to make Stormy Kromer caps, he did more than save a piece of Northwoods culture from extinction. At a time when most of the clothing in this country is imported, he has proven that it's possible to successfully manufacture quality clothing in this country—right here in the Northwoods, no less. His belief that Stormy Kromer Mercantile would have a positive impact on his community has proven correct. Not only do a lot of people in the area have jobs, but Jacquart's organization also makes a point of helping out local charities.

It's quickly obvious that his company offers more than high quality outdoor clothing. For many, the sight of a Kromer cap, warm flannel shirt or plaid wool vest conjures up memories of their fathers and grandfathers.

It brings to mind a time that was more innocent and certainly less complicated. That ability to evoke those warm feelings may be Stormy Kromer Mercantile's most valuable commodity.

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