

**WHAT TO WEAR:** Company specializes  
in making work pants for women/**page D1**



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## Woman's Touch:

### *Red Ants Pants Specializes in Clothing For Working Women*

Story by Camden Easterling Photography by Erik Petersen of the Chronicle

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS - Sarah Calhoun doesn't have a business degree nor a resume long on commerce.

But the woman knows pants.

More specifically, she knows what kinds of pants don't function for women who work in the woods, on the ranch or in other outdoor terrains.

"When you're doing manual labor," said the 28-year-old founder of Red Ants Pants, a White Sulphur Springs company that makes work pants for women, "it's just infuriating to be stopping all the time to pull your pants up."

After a slew of manual labor jobs ranging from wildfire trail restoration to instructing for Outward Bound, Calhoun had plenty of experience being dissatisfied with the work pants available to women.

Sturdy work pants for women were essentially nonexistent, she said, and regular trousers just didn't hold up to the kind of rigorous demands of her field. She tried men's work pants - sturdier, but short of comfortable and wellfitting.

Her solution? Make the pants herself.

In October 2006, Calhoun opened the doors of her Main Street shop, which doubles as her home, and the online channels of her Web site.

"It was out of necessity," she said. "I was incredibly frustrated with not having the products that I needed to get work done, and I knew other people were too."

Red Ants Pants are a deep chocolate brown that feel heavy and substantial to the touch, like pants that were meant for serious work and can sustain significant wear.

"They're just really durable," customer Tanya Hill, 27, said.

As a ranch hand and wrangler in White Sulphur Springs, Hill has high standards for the life span of her pants. "They just don't wear out as fast as a pair of jeans."

Hill regularly goes through at least two pairs of jeans in a year and after six months of wearing Red Ants Pants, the pair still is in good shape, she said.

Calhoun said Red Ants Pants are reinforced in areas, such as in the knees, seat and upper thighs, where women are prone to "blowouts" of fabric that finally caves under the stress of much manual labor.

Knowing that while women who work might have similar



*Sarah Calhoun, owner of Red Ants Pants, displays a pair of her work pants designed for women at her shop in White Sulphur Springs.*

durability needs among many industries, Calhoun recognized that ladies don't all come in one shape. So Red Ants Pants come in two cuts: straight and curvy.

Women, such as Hill, who have a linear build opt for the straight. Ladies with decidedly feminine forms, such as Calhoun, find the curvy cut moves with them and has a little extra room where women often need it.

The company offers 70 different combinations of sizes by waist and inseam so women get what fits them best.

The pants also sit slightly lower on the waist than some other women's pants. They're not quite hip huggers, but customers won't find their waistbands uncomfortably close to their ribs. And they're still high enough in the back to offer full coverage.

"These pants fit like a dream!" reads a quotation from a California wildland firefighter that Calhoun has posted on her shop wall.

"Putting on these pants was a religious experience," reads another from a professor in Arizona.

As for Calhoun, who wears Red Ants Pants frequently even now that she primarily works behind a desk, pulling on the pair that she knew was right after many trial runs with a pattern maker



was a memorable moment.

"When I finally put them on," she said, "man, that was a good day."

She also has some male clients who aren't afraid to put on a pair of women's pants so long as they're comfortable and sturdy, she said.

## High Standards

At \$119 a pair, the pants aren't cheap.

But Calhoun said she is committed to working with companies that are environmentally and socially responsible.

"That's why they're pricey," she said.

She contracts with a Seattle company that pays and treats its workers well for the manufacturing. The company she buys her cotton canvas from in India is "recognized for maintaining global standards for eco-friendly manufacturing," according to her Web site.

Those are high standards, said Richard Siberell, who lives near Bozeman and is one of Calhoun's business mentors.

Through owning his own design-consulting business and spending many years working for outdoor gear company Patagonia, Siberell is familiar with the realities of reconciling personal values such as Calhoun's with how products are made and business is done these days, he said.

"It costs her," he said.

Nonetheless, the pants are "very high quality," he said.

Calhoun, whose Red Ants Pants are shipped to her for later delivery to customers, acknowledges that she could rework her business model and use foreign manufacturers or lesser-quality fabric to bring down her costs. But that's not the way she wants to work.

"There's been a couple moments of shock value," Calhoun said of telling customers the price. But clients seem to be more comfortable with the price tag once they hear about the company's values, she said.

"And usually, once they try the pants on, they're hooked," she said.

Hill said that after buying several pairs of jeans each year for work, \$119 will be well worth it if they outlast her other pants.

Calhoun currently is a one-woman shop, spending about 60 hours a week on the company, although she gets occasional help from friends with packaging and shipping.

About 80 percent of her business comes through phone or Internet orders, the remainder comes from in-store traffic.

## In the Beginning

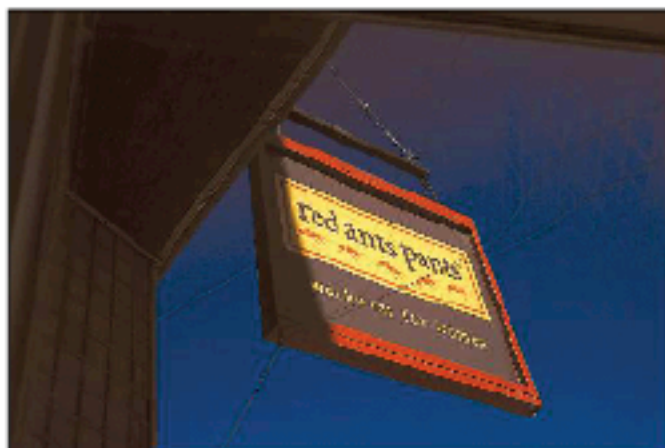
Calhoun spent about two years getting Red Ants Pants up and running before she began taking sales orders.

She is quick to credit her many mentors, friends and relatives who've helped her and offered support along the way.

One of the quirkier stories of support is how she met Siberell.

Calhoun was reading a book on starting a business at a Bozeman coffee shop when she was living in the city a few years ago. Siberell was sitting at the same communal table.

Another man at the table asked Calhoun what kind of business she was starting.



*The Red Ants Pants sign hangs outside Calhoun's White Sulphur Springs shop*

"And I thought, 'Oh my gosh, she has no idea what she's getting into,'" Siberell said, laughing good naturedly.

The business of starting a garment company can be daunting because it involves many complex steps to get from having a good idea to getting a product made and distributed, he said.

"I was going into it super naïve," Calhoun admitted.

Siberell gave Calhoun his business card and over the years has provided invaluable support to her in the way of suggestions, contacts and advice, Calhoun said.

Calhoun also credits Mark Terwilliger, the sourcing manager of Bozeman's Simms fishing products, with helping her find contacts for manufacturers and advising her on other business aspects.

## What's With the Name?

The Red Ants Pants name popped into Calhoun's head while she was doing wildland fire recovery work in California. She later talked to a colleague who told her that in ant colonies, all the worker ants are female. The name and that tidbit made for the perfect brand, Calhoun decided.

"And the name sticks," she said. "People remember it and it's just kind of fun."

Each pair of pants has a lone red ant embroidered somewhere on it. If pants buyers find they each have ants in the same place, they win free T-shirts.

Red Ants Pants sells T-shirts and hooded sweatshirts in addition to the namesake pants.

Calhoun has sold hundreds of pants since she opened her business. That volume is fine by her, for now, because she holds down the shop herself, she said. She didn't know what to expect, so a number in the hundreds feels comfortable.

Based on the feedback she's gotten from customers and her own experiences finding work pants for women, Calhoun thinks the business has the potential for substantial growth – she just hopes it doesn't come too fast.

"It could go nuts," she said. "I just hope it doesn't go nuts all at once."

After all, even a woman who's traded the field for the desk still needs time to get outside – and into her own product – to do some work.

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