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**AUTUMN 2008**

**THE RESOURCE GUIDE TO NORTH CENTRAL MONTANA**



## BACK TO BUSINESS— *Cathy Moser*

Jeanne Wahl and Sarah Calhoun are blazing enterprising trails through the heart of Montana's cattle country. Even better, their successful companies are thriving in the bucolic towns they love. In Lewistown, Wahl and her company, Hangin 'J' Custom Leather, create classic, elegant buckskin clothing inspired by the garments worn by Native Americans and mountain men, cowboys and cowgirls. As for Calhoun, she founded her company, Red Ants Pants, on Main Street in White Sulphur Springs. She's spent much of her life working outside and has dedicated her line of rugged work pants to women who work outdoors.



Sara Calhoun with black lab HayDuke in the Crazy Mountains.

Calhoun grew up on a farm and she's worked on ranches. She has a degree in Environmental Science and is a former Outward Bound instructor who taught courses in backpacking and canoeing. As a former trail crew leader, she built and maintained hiking trails. She knows first hand that women who engage in some type of manual labor often settle on wearing men's clothing. "Through my life experi-

ences, I discovered I wasn't the only woman facing the same challenge of finding durable, comfortable-fitting pants," Calhoun says. When she founded Red Ants Pants, she committed herself to making a pair of women's pants tough enough to withstand the rigors of outdoor work: barbed wire, soot, dirt, gumbo and manure. She did just that. In 2006, Red Ants Pants opened its doors.

Each pair of pants is made of 12-ounce cotton canvas duck and reinforced in the knees, seat and upper thighs. The chocolate brown color conceals muck and grime residue. Because Calhoun understands women's bodies are as varied as their personalities, she offers 70 size combinations and two cuts: straight or curvy. Linear, lanky women choose the straight cut, while the more curvaceous gals opt for curvy. Retailing for \$119, the pants sit slightly below the waist, but ample material in the back provides full coverage. More Red Ants Pants apparel includes t-shirts for \$15 and hooded sweatshirts for \$39.

Calhoun uses a small mother-daughter firm in Seattle to manufacture the pants. The material is imported from a company in India that produces some of the highest quality fabric in the world and is recognized as an industry leader in global, eco-friendly manufacturing. Calhoun could use foreign manufacturers or lesser-quality fabric to bring down her costs, but that's not representative of her company's values. "I know \$119 for pants is a lot of money, but I believe my customers want a quality product and will support my com-





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## Why the name Red Ants Pants?



© Courtesy of Red Ants Pants

pany's commitment to U.S. manufacturing," she says. "The pants will treat you well."

Several months ago, Crystal Hagerman, a wild fire prevention specialist for Park, Gallatin and Meagher Counties, bought a pair. "What amazes me is they are so comfortable and durable," Hagerman says. "I'm pleased 100 percent. I've been telling other women about the pants, trying to get the word out about Sarah's product."

Through word-of-mouth endorsements, and a Web site where you can order products on-line, Calhoun's company reaches

customers far beyond White Sulphur Springs.

Why the name, Red Ants Pants? Think of an ant colony where the females do all the work. It's the perfect brand for her line. Embroidered somewhere on each pair of pants is a lone red ant. And why did Calhoun settle in White Sulphur Springs? "I spent a year in Bozeman, but there was no sense of community," she explains. "I decided I wanted a smaller, more rural town. That's why I'm here."

East of Calhoun's company and across the Little Belt Mountains, Jeanne Wahl says the friendly people in Lewis-



© Courtesy of Red Ants Pants





Jeanne Wahl in Duster



Courtesy of Hangin' 'J' Custom Leather

town, and the surrounding prairie and mountains, make the area a perfect summer place for her and Hangin' 'J' Custom Leather, her custom garment business. Wahl has a passion for horses, and her seasonal arrangement of spending summers in Lewistown and winters in Congress, Arizona, allows her to ride her two horses almost year round. It's not surprising to learn from the self-proclaimed cowgirl that a wagon train served as the impetus for Hangin' 'J' Custom Leather. In 1990, she signed up to ride in the 1890-1990 Wyoming Centennial Wagon Train. The real adventure, however, was coming up with a piece of period clothing to wear on the journey.

Deciding that buckskin was more her style than skirts and a bonnet, Wahl designed and hand stitched a buckskin shirt and a pair of leggings inspired by authentic Sioux clothing. Her success with those two garments led to a fringed vest. She wore it on a visit to Jackson Hole. "People stopped me on the street in Jackson and asked where I bought my vest," Wahl says. "Suddenly I had customers. I ended up spending three weeks in Jackson sewing vests in my friend's backyard."

Since then, she's been turning soft deerskin into stylish, functional garments that reflect her own fascination for the Old West, as well as bringing to mind an indelible image: Native Americans and mountain men in buckskin dress. "I

strive for a Native American look with cowgirl class," Wahl says as she displays a buckskin jacket trimmed with long, thin fringe. That's her trademark, lots of elegant, wavy fringe sometimes as long as 20 inches.

Each of Wahl's all-natural garments is an original design and is hand cut from deerskins bought at tanneries. She studies each skin, feels its texture and deciphers patterns. Designing the clothing is her favorite step. She begins transforming buckskin into clothing with simple tools: a rotor cutter, ruler and hole punch. Wahl then hand stitches the garment together with a needle and leather thread. She adorns each creation with silver buttons, feathers, beads, strands of buffalo hair, and pieces of bone and antler. Her signature piece is a unisex, full-length Dakota Duster. Not only are her finished garments functional pieces of clothing, but they are also pieces of art.

Wahl has men and women's lines offering vests, shirts, full- and knee-length skirts, and waist-, hip- and thigh-length jackets, wedding dresses and other formal wear. She's ventured into home fashion and has designed buckskin bedspreads, pillow shams and window treatments. "My biggest challenge is time," Wahl says. "Hand stitching each garment requires many hours. The fringe is especially time consuming. I work most of the day, then take a break and ride a





Courtesy of Hangin 'J' Custom Leather

horse, then sew until 10:00 p.m." Boutiques in Santa Fe, Cody, Jackson and Whitefish carry her one-of-a-kind garments that range in price from \$200 to \$2,000. "Every garment I make is always the best I can do," she says.

At the Hide Out store in Jackson, customers shop for eclectic, hand-made Western apparel. "Jeanne's garments have an authentic, 1800s frontier look," says shop manager "T". "The quality of her work is fabulous."

So far Wahl has managed her company without e-mail, a fax machine or Web site. After 18 years, that might soon be changing. "This summer I plan to invest in a Web site and laptop," she says.

The dedication, ingenuity and gumption displayed by Wahl and Calhoun has brought them success in the heart of cattle country. When Wahl needed a period outfit to ride in a wagon train, she made one. Since then, many more buckskin garments have defined Hangin 'J' Custom Leather. As for Calhoun, she recognized that women like herself, working hard and getting dirty in corrals, forests and fields, needed a decent pair of pants. Today, she and Red Ants Pants offer them comfortable, tough-as-a-boot women's work pants.



Red Ants Pants

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Courtesy of Hangin 'J' Custom Leather

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~Freelancer Cathy Moser writes about history, lifestyles and the outdoors from her home in central Montana's Judith Mountains.