

SEVEN DAYS  
[March 6, 2019]

MIDDLEBURY'S BEAU TIES COLLARS THE  
MARKET ON DAPPER NECKWEAR

Anyone who wears a bow tie is making a statement. It can be "I'm conservative," "I'm in the wedding party," "I'll be your server this evening," or "I'm intelligent and dexterous enough to knot my own bow tie." Regardless of the message, bow ties get noticed, as do the people who sport them.

Not everyone can pull one off—or tie one on. Those who wear bow ties are a rarefied set. And for many bow tie enthusiasts around the country, their bow tie mecca is Beau Ties Ltd of Vermont: a modern, one-story manufacturing facility in a Middlebury industrial park. There, bow tie aficionados are occasionally seen getting their pictures taken in front of the giant polka-dotted bow tie out front.

Never heard of Beau Ties? That's unsurprising in Vermont, where few people routinely wear ties of any kind. According to Elizabeth Smith, copresident and CEO of Beau Ties, most of the company's clients live out of state and buy their products online or through their catalogs.

But this predominantly retail business, now in its 26th year, boasts an impressive clientele of famous bow tie-wearing blokes: the late popcorn entrepreneur Orville Redenbacher, science educator Bill Nye "The Science Guy" and retired "CBS News Sunday Morning" host Charles Osgood, who has his own signature line of bow ties with the company.

Beau Ties has also produced ties for the Obama White House, Tiffany & Co., PBS, and countless colleges, prep schools and fraternal organizations. It's also the official tie maker for the U.S. House of Representatives and the Vermont Statehouse. And its private-label clients include fine menswear retailers Ben Silver, Barneys New York and Brooks Brothers.

On a reporter's recent tour of the facility, Smith and fellow copresident Cy Day Tall rarely referred to their clientele as "customers." Instead, they were "our guys" or "our fellas." While the bow tie market isn't huge, or exclusively male, the people who purchase their bow ties, neckties and other fashion accessories—cummerbunds, cufflinks, suspenders, cravats, pocket squares—tend to return time and again. Often they'll phone the company and ask to speak to a specific employee who helped them in the past.

"In our mind, we're a family business," explained Smith, who splits management duties with Tall. Smith handles customer service and sales, while Tall is the chief marketing officer and "wordsmith" of the catalog, the mainstay of their retail business.

Beau Ties' familial feel extends to its staff, too. Of the 30 employees, several are mother-daughter or grandparent-grandchild pairs. Many, including Smith, have been with Beau Ties 20 years or more. All but three are women. The company also hires no seasonal help, Smith noted, so that everyone can earn a decent wage with benefits.

Notwithstanding its reputation for formal attire, Beau Ties is actually a casual and relaxed workplace, where several seamstresses were listening to music on headphones and joking among themselves while sewing. Zooney, a small black pug, and Margy, an energetic Welsh corgi, enthusiastically greeted a visiting reporter.

Beau Ties was founded in 1993 by Bill Kenerson and his wife, Deborah Venman. Kenerson, a native of New Haven, Conn., and a Marine Corps veteran who attended Yale University, moved to Vermont in 1978 to buy the Killington Country Resort. A year later

he took a job at Simmonds Precision Products in Vergennes, where he worked until 1990. In 1991, then-governor Richard Snelling tapped him to serve as commissioner of economic development.

Though Kenerson had a strong business background, he had no training in men's apparel, Smith said. But he was a dyed-in-the-wool bow tie aficionado who inherited many of his favorites from his father and grandfather. Discouraged by the dearth of quality ties he liked, he and Venman launched their own bow tie business in the spring of 1993.

Two months later, they hired Vivian LaFave, a New Haven seamstress, who set up their shop in her basement and began cutting and sewing ties from fabrics Kenerson and Venman purchased in New York City's garment district. LaFave is still with the company and considered the grand dame of the sewing floor.

Kenerson and Venman began by marketing just eight bow ties via a one-page circular, which they mailed to 5,000 people; it eventually evolved into a catalog. The company also advertised in periodicals that Kenerson assumed would appeal to fellow bow tie wearers, such as Smithsonian magazine and the New Yorker.

Smith remembers the surge of business that occurred the day after Kenerson ran an ad on page two of the Wall Street Journal in the late 1990s. "We couldn't answer the phone fast enough," she recalled.

For several years, Kenerson and Venman ran the business out of their home, said Smith. However, the company quickly outgrew that space.

"Deb had to get up and get dressed every morning because we had to go through their bedroom just to get to our offices," she noted. In November 1999, Beau Ties moved into its current building. Wanting to maintain the company's homey feel, Kenerson had it outfitted with a large kitchen, an outdoor deck, a grill and even a dog run.

Soon, the company was producing 36- to 48-page catalogs that featured nearly two dozen new ties per month, as well as some ancillary products. The company's website also lists another 500 to 600 bow ties, which come as pre-tied, clip-on or "freestyle," that is, DIY knots.

Basically, the styles fall into two categories, Smith said: the subdued patterns for "the conservative fellows" and the loud, bold and bright colors for the more flamboyant dressers. On the day of Seven Days' visit, seamstresses were sewing plenty of green Celtic themes (for St. Patrick's Day), hearts (for Valentine's Day), and purple, green and gold masks (for Mardi Gras). Mostly, the fabrics come from China, Italy and the UK, Smith said.

It's worth noting that the "Ltd" in the company name isn't an aesthetic flourish but reflects the time-sensitive availability of its products.

"Bill and Deb's concept was to be limited, so that people come back," Smith explained. "I have to have something [new] to entice them to buy from me every month."

Beau Ties continued to grow throughout the 2000s. By September 2012, however, Kenerson, who was facing significant health challenges, sold the company to its current owners: David Kramer, who lives in New York State, and David Mutter, in California. Though other buyers approached him, Smith said, Kenerson insisted on finding people who would keep the company in Vermont and run it the same way he and his wife had.

"This was Bill's baby," Smith added. "Every single person who worked here was completely valuable to him." As she noted, Kenerson opened every piece of mail that came in and usually answered customers himself. A mere two months after the sale,

the "Beau" of Beau Ties died at the age of 81.

Though one might assume that the typical Beau Ties customer is a stodgy, Barry Goldwater-era conservative, Smith said that members of the younger generation also want to fashion one on.

Representative of the new demographic is 21-year-old Andrew Brown of Bristol, who's been working at Beau Ties since he was 17. His grandmother, Barb, works there, too. The younger Brown, a dapper youth who sports a bow tie daily, is now the company's social media manager.

"The bow tie wearer is the musician. He's the architect. He's the fella who works in a museum," Smith said. "He's the attorney and the judge. He's the young guy who wants to wear something on 'bow tie Friday.' He's the preppy kid who wants something to wear to the yacht club."

Doctors and other health care professionals tend to prefer bow ties, too. Why? The short ties don't drape onto their patients and spread germs, Smith explained. Pediatricians like them because babies and toddlers can't grab them. In fact, Burlington pediatrician Joe Hagan belongs to a professional group of docs from around the country called the Pediatric Travel Club, which gets its neckwear from Beau Ties.

Tall, who names all the ties and writes the product descriptions, said that, when Beau Ties first started, there were maybe five other bow tie manufacturers in the United States. Today, there are more than 50. To remain competitive, she said, Beau Ties keeps its prices in the \$45 to \$49 range, though some higher-end ties cost as much as \$75.

Beau Ties is unique in another respect, Smith added: It accepts old neckties from customers who want them converted into bow ties. Such "one-off" special orders are yet another way to maintain customer loyalty.

"Some guys will send in a hundred of them," Smith added. "We make an awful lot of custom ties here."

Like other industries, Beau Ties enjoys great benefits and faces challenges from being in the Green Mountain State. Its location far from its customer base increases the cost of shipping. For years, the company printed its catalogs on the East Coast until, as Tall put it, distribution costs became "exquisitely painful."

At the same time, Tall noted, "Vermont always has a certain cachet, and we certainly play that up in every letter we write."

"The core of this place is the manufacturing," Smith added. "I don't mean to sound schmaltzy, but I'm the one who goes out into the world to sell this stuff, and I'm always so proud. I never have a product that I don't think is amazing. And how fortunate am I? I get to see it get made every day."

(At the request of Mr. SCHUMER, the following statement was ordered to be printed in the RECORD.)

#### VOTE EXPLANATION

● Ms. HARRIS. Mr. President, I was absent for vote No. 77 on Executive Calendar No. 200, the nomination of David Bernhardt to be Secretary of the Interior. Had I been present, I would have voted no on the nomination.●

#### NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I want to take a moment to join in the celebration of National Library Week. This year's theme, "Libraries = Strong