



Where the Wild Goose Goes

Ron and Susi Bell, founders of Wildgoose Manufacturing in Ingram, Texas, love outdoor experiences and outdoor people.

“Like us, our customers love the land, agriculture, wildlife—and they embrace the outdoor lifestyle,” said Ron, who along with his wife Susi, has been building the company since 1984. “They appreciate quality possessions and quality relationships. Those are the folks we’re drawn to—we’re blessed because those are the folks who are drawn to our products.”

Today, the couple call the Hill Country home. They manage an 11,000-square-foot facility which includes a 2,200-square-foot store and gallery, a manufacturing facility and a distribution network that includes mail and/or phone order, internet sales, and direct sales at trade shows. Their inventory includes small goods in leather and leather/nylon combinations, luggage and bags in leather and leather/nylon combinations as well as unique hand-crafted, outdoor-themed home décor and gift items.

It wasn’t always that way.

WRITTEN BY LORIE WOODWARD CANTU



THE BEGINNING

Some businesses start on a shoestring, but not Wildgoose.

"People tell you they started their business on a shoestring. Not us," Susi said. "We started ours barefoot in the garage—we couldn't even afford a shoestring."

But before there was a garage or a business or even a romance, there was the outdoors. Ron was reared in Dallas, but spent all the time he could on relatives' farms and ranches.

"I was a country boy trapped in the city," Ron said. "My brother and I spent all of our time trying to get outdoors, even if that just meant playing in the back yard. The outdoors has always been part of who I am."

As soon as he was able—and every chance he got—Ron went hunting, fishing, hiking or camping. The really good trips involved all four things.

Susi's family moved from the lush hills of Arkansas to the high desert of Arizona before she was born. Her father was an extension agent affiliated with the University of Arizona. He was assigned to Navajo County in northern Arizona, where Susi spent her childhood riding horses and tagging along with her dad to nearby ranches and reservations to discuss crops and livestock. Her mother was a home demonstration agent.

"I started going to 4-H meetings before I started going to school," Susi said. Her first project was sewing, which she began doing when she was four. Students couldn't join 4-H until they were eight years old.

Unlike Ron, Susi didn't start hunting until she was an interior design student at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Her immediate family, with the exception of her grandfather, weren't hunters.

"I was the kid who was standing out by Grandpa's dog run when he came home from bird hunting," Susi said. "Mom told me later that I soaked it up every way I could."

THE ROMANCE

After graduating from Texas A&M University with an animal science degree and completing a stint in the Marine Corps, Ron found himself back in Dallas.

Susi had moved to Dallas to work with her brothers' couture leather goods business. Ron was

her across-the-balcony neighbor in an apartment complex.

One night Ron hosted a dinner for his buddies to celebrate a successful hunt. The main course was aoudad steaks. He invited Susi.

"What girl in her right mind turns down the chance to eat aoudad?" Susi deadpanned.

The meal must've been good. It sparked a romance that led to a marriage; they have now been together 36 years. Early on, though, Susi was hard to get. She wasn't playing. She was working almost constantly in her brothers' start up business. In order to see her, Ron hung out there when he wasn't at his job.

"Her brothers said, 'You're here all the time, you might as well be working,'" Ron said. "They weren't joking." Ron joined the firm and worked in marketing. Although the company focused on high-end couture leather goods targeted to retailers frequenting the Dallas Market Center, he learned the basic principles of constructing small leather goods and bags.

"I learned a lot, but their market took me far away from the outdoors," Ron said. "In 1984, I decided to find my way back. I wanted to establish a mail order business offering bags for outdoorsmen, but I didn't have any products to put in a catalog or any money to get started."

THE INSPIRATION

In the early 80s, Braniff Airlines went out of business and sold off much of its equipment including at least one commercial sewing machine, which Ron bought.

"I called Susi and said, 'I bought a sewing machine and now you've got to teach me to use it,'" Ron said.

She provided the expertise and Ron provided the inspiration for the initial designs. As they were combining their households, Susi found a box stuffed full of "ratty, worn out bags" and steno pads full of notes. For years, Ron had been keeping samples of bags he found useful and making notes about design and construction improvements.

"From the beginning, it was about making a better bag," Ron said.

Their initial goal was durability and practicality. (The signature leather trim embossed with wildlife

imagery came a bit later.) Ron researched materials finally settling on high-grade nylon Cordura that is incredibly lightweight in relation to its strength. Susi de-constructed those “ratty, worn out” bags to create patterns for the improved versions. They set up shop in their garage and an extra bedroom.

The company was born but the new business didn’t have a name until Susi recalled a story from Ron’s military days. As the tale goes, Ron and several of his friends were enjoying an adult beverage in the OCS in Quantico when the conversation turned to the young men’s future after the service. One was going to be a “real estate tycoon.” Another was going to be a “diamond broker.” A third was going to be a “movie mogul.” When they asked Lt. Bell what he was going to do, he responded, “I’m not sure but I will go where the lone wolf calls and the wild goose goes.”

In a moment of epiphany, the couple determined their luggage would “take people where the wild goose goes and bring them home again.” Wildgoose Manufacturing was fully fledged. The bags were designed to survive the rigors of the outdoors and the airlines.

Early on, world-traveling customers put Wildgoose’s bags to the test. One day they got a call from a client who had purchased gear bags to use on a hunt in the Canadian Rockies. A pack horse took a misstep on a treacherous trail and rolled down the mountain. The client said, “The horse didn’t make it, but your bags did.”

Attention to detail and quality is the company’s hallmark.

“I don’t like to repair luggage or relationships, so we build our bags right the first time and deliver them with a level of exceptional customer service,” Ron said. “We want our customers to have a high-quality product and an even better experience.”

THE LAND

In the beginning, the company relied on trade shows for sales. This meant Susi and Ron were on the road more than they were home. When they realized they could run their business from anywhere they began spending a few extra days in every destination. They wanted a country setting for their growing business.

Over the course of several years, they explored locations in the Northeast, the Northwest, the West, but nothing felt like home until they spent a few days in the Texas Hill Country.

“We traveled thousands of miles to realize what we already knew—nowhere beats the Texas Hill Country,” Susi said.

In the late 80s at the height of the bust, the entire Hill Country was for sale, but nobody was lending money. As a result, the Bells had to prioritize their expenditures, so purchasing the business property in Ingram came first.

“We looked all over Gillespie and Kerr counties,” Ron said. “Some remote land near Leakey called our name, but we knew we needed to be near a small town so we would have access to employees.”

Building the business trumped building a home, so 10 years passed before they purchased the country property they had always wanted. The 53-acre ranchette is about 15 minutes from their manufacturing facility. Like many Hill Country properties, it was used hard and cedar moved in. Today, they’re busy reclaiming the land that Susi has lovingly dubbed “Ron’s Agricultural Experiment Station.”

Susi requested and received a chain saw for an anniversary gift, but it quickly became apparent that cutting cedar by hand wasn’t making a significant ecological dent. They saved up and hired a cedar



shearer to tackle the thickest stands, leaving the old growth cedars and any other tree species.

“Thick cedar chokes out other plants,” Susi said. “We wanted to encourage native plants, especially trees, to come back.”

The couple planted trees, but had to contend with an overpopulation of deer who ate almost everything that poked its head up. Every tree the couple planted had to be caged and watered to give it a fighting chance.

Cedar clearing left massive brush piles. Burning brush piles wasn’t Ron’s preferred option because there were several places on the ranch where plant life hadn’t recovered after fire.

The solution? Cedar bomas patterned after the thorn hedges that protect African camps from lions.

“We created an enclosure to protect the newly cleared land from deer by stacking the cedar, either high or wide,” Susi said.

The “wide” portions are roughly 4 feet tall x 15 feet wide, while the “tall” portions are at least 6 feet tall. The Bells installed a gate so they could access to the interior.

“A neighbor who saw the property from the air told us that we’d managed to grow our own crop circles,” Ron said laughing. “It was amazing to see what came back inside the enclosure in just a year.”

A cherry tree that now stands 25 feet tall and mature walnut trees are some of the couple’s favorite comeback specimens. Bluestem, side oats grama, other native grasses and shrubs are also making a comeback in the enclosure.

“The trees that God planted and watered came up and thrived,” Ron said. “The ones we planted and watered struggled, so we decided to leave it to God.”

THE COMMITMENT

In business and in life, the Bells stand up for the things they believe in.

"It's important in life to believe in something," Ron said. "The same holds true for business. Our focus is on conserving the land and the wildlife. Our business is tied closely to that, so it makes sense to support organizations that value the same things."

The Bells support a variety of conservation groups, but they are most invested in the efforts of the Texas Wildlife Association (TWA) and the Texas Bighorn Society (TBS). The groups' focus of doing what's best for Texas land and Texas wildlife is a strong connection point for the couple.

"They're both Texas-based grassroots organizations that want to ensure our wild places and wild things are well taken care of," Ron said. "They're made up of people who are recognized 'chiefs' in their professions, but when they're working for TWA and TBS they're content to be proverbial Indians because they want to get good things done for the right reasons."

Wildgoose has been a fixture at every TWA Convention since the second one.

"There was an immediate connection with TWA's people and its mission because we loved talking about land and its conservation with people who appreciate it as we do," Susi said. "When we take the time to go outdoors and just stop, look and listen the beauty is amazing. God blesses us every minute we're outdoors if we will slow down to appreciate it."



To experience Wildgoose for yourself, visit the showroom at 3187 Junction Highway, Ingram, Texas which many people consider a Hill Country destination; catch them at the annual TWA Convention in San Antonio or the Safari Club International show in Las Vegas; or visit the website at www.wildgoosetexas.net.

For discerning businesses, ranches and individuals, Wildgoose Manufacturing offers customization that ranges from branding existing products with ranch brands or corporate logos to designing a custom product from scratch.

For more information about this or any Wildgoose product or service, call (800) 749-1805 or (830) 367-5553.

