

Sporting Life

By Jameson Parker

Whether you hail from Alaska or Alabama, you've certainly seen Stormy Kromer caps, even if you didn't know who made them.

Fashions come and go, but the best things, things that really work, tend to transcend their era and endure. They have legs, as the saying goes, and they use those legs to lope tirelessly down the jogging path of history. Blue jeans, for instance. As we know them, blue jeans have been around since the mid-1800s, and is there anyone who doesn't own a pair? The .30-06. It's been around for 103 years, you can still find it anywhere and everywhere, and in different bullet weights, it can do more than any other round. Beer. It quenched the thirst of the builders of Babylon and it will probably quench the thirst of settlers on Venus or Mars, who will almost certainly need a good deal of thirst-quenching.

Stormy Kromer caps.

Say what? What caps?

Unless you live someplace like Key West where warm headgear is superfluous, sort of like the fins on a '59 Cadillac, you've seen Stormy Kromer

caps even if you didn't know what they were called or why they're called that. And if you hunt in extreme weather and don't own a Stormy Kromer cap, then you have put up with too much discomfort for far too long. After you buy one, you can send any little token of appreciation to me care of this magazine.

I went to college in Wisconsin and I can testify that there is nothing between the Upper Midwest and the Arctic Circle except a barbed wire fence. Hunters in the Upper Midwest are, by definition, hardy souls, given to severe masochism. You have to wonder about an entire segment of the country, a separate genus, possibly, that takes time out from ice fishing to compete in ice-carving contests. If anyone knows something about staying warm outside, it's those folks. It was in that neck of the woods that the Stormy Kromer cap came into existence.



This 1930s' photo includes relatives and a friend of Stormy Kromer owner Bob Jacquart, all donned in SK headwear after their rabbit hunt. Right: Promo photo of (from left): Original Stormy Kromer Cap, Twill shirt and Button Vest; Ida Kromer Cap and Mackinaw Coat; Waxed Cotton Cap, Flannel Shirt and Button Vest.



Stormy Kromer was a former semi-pro baseball player turned railroad engineer in Wisconsin who lost too many hats to the frigid winds that whipped through the cab of his locomotive. One icy day in 1903 he lost his hat and his patience simultaneously and

asked his wife to make him something that would actually stay on his head. Ida, his wife, came up with a modified baseball cap, made out of wool, with a short, flexible visor and flaps that could be pulled down to protect the ears. It was not then, and still

is not today, high fashion or high-tech. It owes more to Elmer Fudd than to the haute couture runways of New York or Milan, but unless you're talking about Heidi Klum or Giselle Bündchen, I'd rather be out in the woods with Elmer anyway.

The hat proved popular enough with the fellow railroad employees who saw it that the Kromers were kept busy making hats in their home for the next 16 years. By 1919 they had reached such a wide audience that they had to make the leap from semi-pro hat-makers to full-time professionals, opening a manufacturing plant in Milwaukee and happily churning out highly functional icons – survival gear, really – of the frigid North.

Now fast forward almost 100 years (98, to be precise) and witness what can happen when the right man is in the right place at the right time.

The Kromers had sold their company to Richard Grossman and in 2001 Grossman decided to discontinue production of probably the best winter hat ever made. Bob Jacquart, a former canvas-worker-turned-owner of a sewing company specializing in dog beds and boat covers, was having his morning coffee at his favorite local diner in Ironwood, Michigan. The gossip that morning was about the demise of the winter icon and the locals were all planning a run on nearby stores to snap up any hats they could find.

Bob Jacquart decided to snap up an opportunity. He called the company that day and two months later he was the owner of Stormy Kromer Mercantile.


Thanks to some intelligent marketing, growth has been phenomenal. At a time when too many American companies are closing their doors and having their products manufactured under dubious working conditions in countries you probably don't want to hunt in, Stormy Kromer Mercantile has gone from turning out 6,000 caps a year to hiring workers in order to make ten times that number today.

And it's still the same hat, made in the same way, right in Ironwood. The only difference is that in addition to the original cap, they

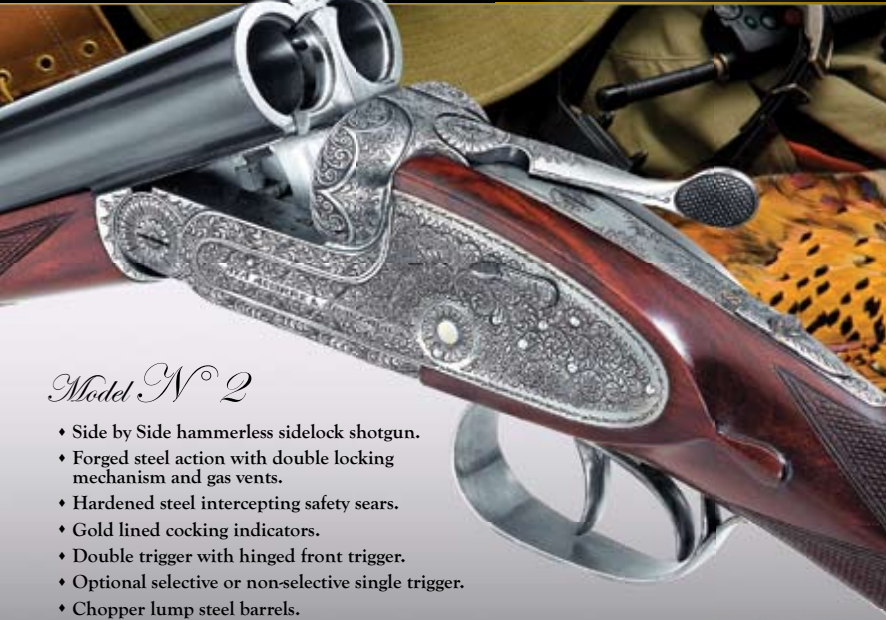
offer 11 other models – including a flexible fit variety – in a dozen colors, as well as a waxed cotton version for rainy weather and two extra-heavy versions for extra-serious masochists. Or Upper Midwest deer hunters.

They sell a variety of other merchandise as well, including work shirts and outerwear, and two of their best products are also made right in America. Their Mackinaw is made out of 100 percent virgin wool and

features a zip-in (or out) vest for layered warmth. And speaking of vests, their other American-made product is a 26-ounce virgin wool button vest, which is about the most practical and flexible piece of clothing anyone can own.

Stormy Kromer Mercantile will also provide custom embroidery so you can have your company logo put on their caps or other products. Just make sure your company will be around for a long time, because the Stormy Kromer cap has legs. 

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