

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

Everyone knows an L.L. Bean catalogue. The current one, for Spring, shows a fly fisherman in waders and a tackle vest playing out a line by a pool in a trout stream. A waterfall sends up spray in the background. Crouched down, the fisherman hasn't managed to interest a trout yet—but he will, and he's ready. His net hangs off his left hip ready to snare his catch and set it sizzling in a frying pan for breakfast.

Even for those who have never eaten a trout straight from the stream, let alone hooked one, it's an evocative



scene, in a style that hasn't changed since the catalogues of the Thirties. Inside, the glossy pages maintain the same spirit, as they show off all the clothing and equipment a fisherman—or a non-fisherman—would need for such a venture, and a lot more besides. There's the famous, eminently practical, if somewhat ungainly Maine Hunting Shoe, the Hollofil insulated Cold-Proof Hat, the Velcro-closing "Zip-Flap" Shooting Mitt. . . . Such is the stuff of which outdoor dreams are made.

Now in its sixty-ninth year, the catalogue runs 128 full-color pages, describing each of the several hundred items in the calm but loving detail that a parent might use to describe a favored child. In an age where most products are promoted by wild exclamations about how they will change your life, the Bean copy is charmingly soft-spoken. It's informative and to the point, tenderly relating each item's looks, dimensions, special features, material, size, color, and weight.

In other hands, perhaps, great claims could be made for the psychosexual benefits of Bean's shapely Women's Sports Vest, but the catalogue says only "a nice looking vest for active wear," and then passes quickly on to the more important matters of the vest's goose down insulation and its special water repellency. Or, with Bean's Red Suspenders, others might assert that such an item was sure to

liven up any party. But no, Bean's declares only: "Manufactured by us for hunters, guides, and trappers for use with heavy pants." Or what about Bean's familiar blue and white Norwegian sweater? Surely the catalogue could somehow tastefully refer to its recent rise to the position of pullover of choice by a generation of prep school graduates—if, that is, the best-selling *Preppy Handbook* is any guide. Nope. "Long used by Norwegian fishermen who require unusual durability and warmth in a sweater," intones the catalogue.

THE REAL THING

It's just as the company founder, old Leon Leonwood Bean, would have liked. L.L. initiated the no-nonsense prose in his very first catalogue back in 1912, and the company has stuck to it. *Continued on page 62*

L.L. BEAN

THE VENERABLE CATALOGUE
THAT'S HOME TO BOTH
PREPPIES AND BACKWOODSMEN



Bean's Air Cooled Tennis Shoe

Something new in canvas footwear. By the flexing of the foot air is pumped through the holes in side of sole and passes through corrugations directly through holes in insole at heel and toe causing the foot to be constantly in a circulation of air. Grocord cork filter insole prevents dust from entering.

Sponge rubber shock absorbing insoles. Rubber counter. Reinforced toe as shown. With all these features weighs only 5 oz. more than the old type of tennis shoe and is twice as durable. Can be washed without injury.

Color White. Sizes 5 to 12. Price \$1.60 postpaid.



46A

Bean's Arch Support Moccasin

A hand sewed Moccasin made from black medium weight, oil tanned leather. Eyeleted collar and a stable gusset in tip. Molded arch and a rubber sole as shown. Support the same as dress shoe yet has the comfort of the old fashion Whole and half sizes.

Sizes 6 to 12. Price \$2.85

2 to 5 1/2. Price \$

Golf Sto

paid



Basket and Harness
\$1.75 Postpaid

\$2.85
Postpaid

Bean's Fish Basket

Made from finest grade imported white split willow in new form fitting concave back as shown at right. Less bulky than old standard shape.

Size 13" long on bottom. Price \$1.15. Price with genuine pigskin harness designed so that Basket can be worn at side or on back \$1.75. Harness only, 70¢ postpaid. Every Basket has a pocket on inside of cover containing three of Bean's Trout Hooks, one of each size.

Bean's New Automatic Reel

Is made for us under our own name. Automatic reels have long since passed the experimental stage. This new Reel has many improvements not found in automatic reels of a few years ago. It is much lighter, smoother action and patience at first but you will find it thing else. For stream fishing I that is electroplated, not laquered, scratch or chip off. Diameter 3 1/8". Thickness 1 3/4". Capacity 50 yards "F" enamel or 30 yards "G D G" double tapered line. Weight 6 1/4 ounces. Price, in good reel bag \$3.15 postpaid.



Fish Rod Carrying Case

Bean's Pine Tree Poleless Tent

\$42.75



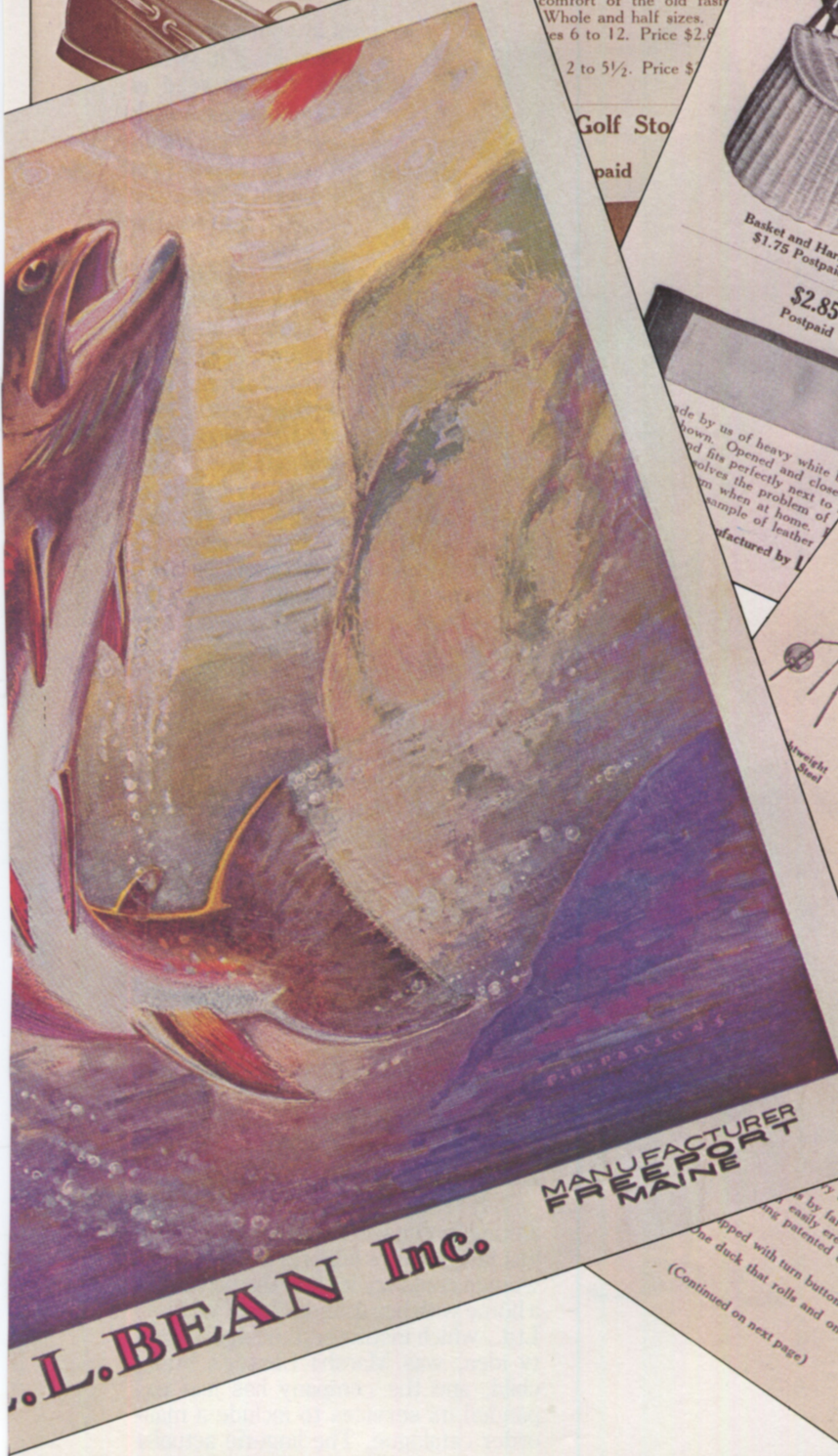
The tent used in the State of Maine exhibit at the Boston and Hartford Sportsmen's Show.

When we decided on the above Poleless Umbrella Tent as the tent we can be made regardless of price. In testing a large number of tents we decided on the above Poleless Umbrella Tent as it has many features.

Camping, has proven beyond doubt its superiority. It will, khaki color, that is waterproof and mildew-resistant. Cannot be beaten for all-around camping purposes. It is light and auto-bed, will accommodate six. A smaller size is available by far the most practical we have ever seen. No corner fasteners, easily erect in six minutes. Adjustments for tentness and corner fasteners with patented clamps (see cut above) on telescoping corner clips with turn buttons for attaching side curtains as shown.

(Continued on next page)

(Spring 1937)



J.L. BEAN Inc.

MANUFACTURER
FREEPORT
MAINE

L.L. BEAN

Continued from page 42

ever since. Current president Leon Gorman, L.L.'s grandson, edits all the final copy himself to make sure it retains the same unmistakable L.L. punch. He's also made sure that the catalogue projects the same distinctive L.L. look—nothing trendy, flimsy, or in any way impractical. Solidity is the idea here—solid colors, solid goods, solid values. The dedication to this idea, ironically, has been so complete that it in itself has developed into an identifiable style, making the L.L. Bean label as sought after—at least in some circles—as that of Calvin Klein or Oscar de la Renta. If, incidentally, you are wondering how the folks at Bean headquarters reacted to being certified by the aforementioned *Preppy Handbook* as the pinnacle of aristocratic style, Don Campo, manager of men's apparel, put it best. "We were bemused," he said, without elaborating.

Lots of things are a little mystifying at L.L. Bean's these days. The company is now expanding at a clip of twenty-five percent a year, bringing in total revenues that are fast approaching two hundred million. With such success, predictably, have come countless takeover offers from large companies eager to liven up their portfolios. President Gorman listens to their emissaries politely, sends them on a tour of the factory, and then bids them, "Good day." The companies should have expected as much: the place is so tight-knit that, instead of entrusting professional models to show off Bean products in the catalogue, the company uses nothing but Bean employees, their families, and friends.

HEAVY TRAFFICKING IN THE HOMESPUN

Yet, despite the many down-home, just-folks qualities of the catalogue, it's hardly a small-time affair. Forty-five million of them will go out in 1982, putting the Bean catalogue's circulation right up there in the big leagues. The Dingley Press, across the street from Bean headquarters in Freeport, Maine, used to print them, but now the copy is sent down to Spartanburg, South Carolina, to be spewed out on high-speed Rotogravure presses by R.R. Donnelley and Sons. Among other things, the new printing and mailing company can sort the mailing list down to the individual mailmen's postal routes, saving Bean's a half-million a year in postage.

And, in the language of the trade, the catalogues really "pull," drawing telephone and mail orders during the

Christmas rush that has just passed at a clip of 30,000 a day. Because the orders during that period expand so dramatically, five hundred employees have to be added to the staff of nine hundred to keep up—typing the order forms into the computer, manufacturing the Bean-made goods, and filling the orders at the warehouse at a rate that must be the envy of Santa and his elves. Despite the volume of orders, Bean's generally sends out each package just four days after it is requested, a practice that has won the company a wide following. The State of Israel bypassed normal supply channels in favor of Bean's when it needed a rush order of snowshoes for its troops in the Golan Heights. When the city of Buffalo was virtually snowed under in 1976, the municipal government made an anxious call to Freeport for long underwear.

It used to be that Bean's had to take its parcels down to the post office to be sent out like everybody else. Now, because of the huge amount of outgoing mail, the post office comes to Bean's, along with the United Parcel Service, backing up their huge trucks right to the warehouse to be loaded directly. During one day of the pre-Christmas rush last season, Bean's filled up sixteen vans, floor to ceiling, with gift packages.

"Lots of people who called up with their orders," recalls Jane Brogli, a former Bean phone operator who now works in the two-person public relations department, "honestly expected me to put down the receiver and walk over to the merchandise shelves and send out their package right then myself." Not quite. With as many as 11,500 telephone orders coming into Bean's a day, the operators rarely have a chance even to put down their headsets, let alone trot off to the warehouse. While people may think of Bean's as operating out of a drafty old barn, actually the gifts emanate from a massive "distribution center," a metal shell forty feet high that covers a full seven acres of what was once Freeport forest. Its vast open interior is rigged with shelves as far as the eye can see, giving a first-time visitor the impression he's in the hold of some vast supertanker. Indeed, it's so big that bicycles have thoughtfully been positioned by the main entrance for anyone who needs to get to the far end in a hurry. Electrical cables are buried in the floor to guide towering fork lifts down the narrow aisles. Computers deliver instructions for cart-drivers on how to make the most efficient route through the center in collecting a particular list of merchandise, and they inform the driver how most efficiently to pack it. Since practically all the goods

are hidden away in cardboard boxes inside this gleaming space station, the only indications that this is L.L. Bean's are the tiny corner reserved for screwing on cross-country ski bindings, and the fact that most of the employees roaming about are wearing Bean Chino's and Freeport Walkers.

SLOW AND STEADY

Curiously enough, the beginnings of L.L. Bean, Inc. were not all that auspicious, for L.L. himself came into the business remarkably unprepared. Born in 1872, Leon Leonwood Bean sold soap door to door in his teens, then drifted about for a couple of decades until he got a job in his brother Ervin's Freeport haberdashery selling overalls. There L.L. made an important discovery. Always an enthusiastic hunter and outdoorsman, he realized that there were no proper boots to wear on a duck shoot. The all-leather boots got waterlogged, and the all-rubber ones were clumsy. But suppose, he wondered, there were a boot that combined the best qualities of each—waterproof rubber bottoms and flexible leather "uppers"? Since no such boot existed, he hired a local cobbler to make a pair. Later, he tied on his hybrid, tramped off into the wild, and came back dry-footed and happy. He then showed considerable down-east pluck by writing out a three-page brochure describing his product—including the now-famous Bean guarantee of "100 percent satisfaction or your money back"—and sending it out to a mailing list of local gun licensees. When a hundred orders came back, L.L. bent his cobbler to the task, packed up the boots, and sent them out himself. And that's when he must have had second thoughts about the money back guarantee, for, of the hundred pairs, all but ten were promptly returned because the uppers tore loose from the lowers.

Unfazed, L.L. made restitution and tinkered with his design, sent out more brochures and more boots, and the business was out of the woods to stay. Now a factory turns out 2,900 pairs per week of the Maine Hunting Shoe, as L.L.'s invention is called.

THE CUSTOMER HAS ALWAYS BEEN RIGHT

Besides discovering an appealing shoe, L.L. also hit upon the methods the company has relied on ever since in selling the darn thing: a convincing catalogue, a good list of likely buyers, and a kindred feeling toward his customers. "Treat your customers like human beings," L.L. always said. That's why he always kept his now-famous retail store open around the clock seven days a week. He couldn't bear the idea of locking anybody out.

Showing himself to be only a little less durable than his Hunting Shoe (once he got the bugs out of it, that is), L.L. ran the company himself until his death in 1967 at the age of ninety-four. For only the second time in history, the first being to mark the death of President Kennedy, the retail store was closed on the day of his funeral. Fifty thousand letters of condolence poured in, many of them including the sort of tribute L.L. would have really appreciated: a request for the Bean catalogue.

In truth, though, the company had gone a little flat in L.L.'s later years. "I eat three meals a day," L.L. used to say. "I have no need for a fourth." When his grandson Leon Gorman took over that year, he proved to have a greater appetite. Gorman stuck to L.L.'s principles, of course (partly because, as a college graduate who'd never worked anywhere except Bean's, he knew no others): products were still to be scrupulously tested by employees and selected outdoorsmen before being added to the catalogue, and new additions would come slowly. (Only now, for instance, is Bean's venturing into bicycle equipment.) The company watchwords would continue to be durability, workmanship, loyalty to the customer, and, above all, providing value.

A PARTICULAR THIRST

But other things would have to change to conform to Gorman's steadfast belief that even L.L. Bean's had to get into the modern world. When Gorman joined the company in 1961, he was the only college graduate on the staff; now there are sixty-six college graduates and fifteen MBAs. Gorman added telephone orders and credit card purchases to expedite buying and he computerized everything. He made the catalogue more colorful and easier to read as well. He expanded the advertising budget (it's now \$1.5 million), and bought or rented more mailing lists to get the catalogue into more people's hands. Gorman also increased the number of catalogues going out to the store's better customers to as many as nine a year. And he moved the headquarters out of the rickety old place that L.L. had built in downtown Freeport and into the ultramodern seven-acre complex on the edge of town. As a result of all this, aided perhaps by the late-Sixties outdoors boom, Bean's has shot up from a piddly little outfit doing \$3.9 million a year under L.L. in 1967 to a pillar of the mail-order business, hauling down revenues of \$160 million in 1981.

TRENDS COME AND GO

There are a number of ironies in

this tale of the little company that grew, but perhaps the most acute one is that a good portion (although no one knows exactly how much) of Bean's most recent sales have stemmed from the emergence of Bean clothing as a fashion item. That's simply crazy. As William End, the head of marketing, explains: "It's a conscious, *written* policy here to avoid fashion. If you're going to sell traditional, functional, long-lived merchandise as we are—non-fashion by definition—then you're going to have fewer markdowns, you're going to have to take lower mark-ups, and you are going to be able to provide value. With fashion, you're paying for the label, paying for a name, for advertising, promotion, and a sales force. But now that Bean's has, for some reason, become fashionable," End pauses dramatically, then brightens, "I have to say it's been *great* for business." Then his sobriety returns. "Still, we were certainly here long before the *Preppy Handbook*, and we'll be here long afterwards."

According to market research, the typical Bean customer is between thirty-five and fifty-four, well-educated, high-salaried, and living somewhere in the greater Northeast. And any time of the day or night, you can get a look at plenty of these folks at the Freeport store. Even at 11 P.M. one recent Tuesday night, while Leighton's Apparel and Freeport Variety are dark and empty across the street, Bean's is jammed with customers getting the feel of a Bean flyrod, or checking out a Bean Barrel Stove.

A LIGHT IN THE WOODS

Although the store exterior was redone a few years ago, the inside was left intact, with the same animal heads poking out from the same knotty pine walls, the same creaky floors, and pretty much the same assortment of Bean-ware. An ordinary sporting goods store, one might think, except for the hour and one other important consideration: Everyone seems absolutely thrilled to be here. The customers act a bit like small children encountering Mickey Mouse at Disneyland. "Oh look!" exclaims a thirty-ish woman with her hair in a bun as she spots a stack of the famous Bean Tote Bags. She runs her fingers along the double-stitched handle. "Oh, I just *have* to have this," she exclaims, as she clutches the bag to her bosom and carries it off to the cashier.

Her glee is by no means unique. Everyone at Bean's likes to tell the story of the Alaskan who went to visit friends in Milwaukee and then drove over a thousand miles to Freeport to drop in at the store "since he was so close by." New Yorkers are said to

drive to Freeport just for the evening. Although Bean's is Freeport's only attraction and, truth be known, nothing much actually happens at the store, it's still enough of an attraction to require three overflowing parking lots. Travelers are forever clicking their Instamatics at the bear in the store window, and many make dollar purchases of insect repellent just as a memento that will be prized as highly as a Statue of Liberty ashtray.

The place has a kind of cult significance. One senses that the wood-sided Freeport store isn't so much a retail outlet as, well, a temple for worshipful customers. How else to account for their enraptured expressions? Mormons could feel no more reaching Salt Lake City, or Moslems encountering Mecca. Here, shoppers who wander among Bean's Camouflage Parkas, Bean's Pocket Watches, and, yes, Coffee Bean's, must imagine they are viewing the sacred relics.

Bean's has developed an image that is almost palpable. Old L.L.'s grizzled mug shines through all the company products just as surely as his down-east yawp sounds through the catalogue copy. But, behind L.L., as behind all great characters, stands something unnameable that looms even larger, something about the native land, and about permanence within a world of change. Customers may not really attain a state of grace by donning Bean's down vests and chamois shirts, but they can't be blamed for chasing the vision—or, in the end, for plunking down their money for a bit of homespun sincerity. ©

John Sedgwick's new book, Night Vision, will be published soon by Simon & Schuster.

The L.L. Bean Guide to the Outdoors by Bill Riviere with the staff of L.L. Bean; Random House, 1981; \$15.50.

With seven years of help from the L.L. Bean staff, Bill Riviere, an avid outdoorsman and writer living in Maine, put together a book that covers aspects of outdoor life from selecting long underwear and canoe paddles to predicting the weather.

The L.L. Bean Guide to the Outdoors is available through the L.L. Bean catalogue, and Random House. To order from the publisher, call (800) 638-6460, or write: Random House; Order Department; Hahn Road; Westminster, MD 21157.