



FIT FOR HER

This page: Sarah Calhoun, owner and operator of Red Ants Pants, relaxes by the stove in her White Sulphur Springs store with her dog, Nellie. Facing page: Customer Allison Grove checks out a pair of pants.

Entrepreneur embraces life in rural Montana while filling a need of working women

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY KENTON ROWE

V“You can’t put curves in squares,” asserts Sarah Calhoun. The dark-haired 30-year-old is the founder of Red Ants Pants, a shop in downtown White Sulphur Springs. Nestled in with purveyors of videos and auto parts, a cafe and two bars, the old red-brick storefront would hardly stand out but for the swarm of ants on the sign.

Calhoun sells sturdy work pants designed specifically for women, a quietly growing segment of the “outdoor” and blue-collar labor force. U.S. Department of Labor statistics show that about 25 percent of workers in the building trades, farming, fishing and forestry are women.

One wall of Calhoun’s shop is stacked to the ceiling with shelves containing nothing but clean, folded pairs of pants. All are made of 12-ounce chocolate-brown cotton duck—Levi Strauss’s original material, Calhoun says, along with the famous blue denim. They have reinforced seats and front legs, many pockets and extra stitching instead of rivets, which get red-hot around fire and freeze in



'THOSE WOMEN WERE AS TOUGH AS YOU GET—HIGH-RISE WELDERS, PILE DRIVERS, STEELWORKERS. THEY'RE COMPLETELY IN A MAN'S WORLD AND FIGHTING ALL THE WAY. PANTS BECOME A SAFETY ISSUE. THEY WERE SO EXCITED.'

Sarah Calhoun, founder of Red Ants Pants, on selling her pants at an expo in Los Angeles.

winter. The pants come in 70 different sizes and two basic styles: Straight—"more linear, with room in the thighs," Calhoun explains, and Curvy—"more room in the seat and thighs." The many combinations of waist and inseam better reflect reality, Calhoun says. Usually women have at most 20 sizes to choose from, and those are further limited by assumptions like taller women are also wider. Calhoun shakes her head. "We come in so many shapes and sizes it's unbelievable."

Big-boned and tall herself, Calhoun grew up on farms in Canada and Connecticut. "I was always getting grass stains or holes in my pants, ripping them, blowing out the knees. Mom would get mad at me." She earned a degree in Environmental Science at Gettysburg College, but before and since, she has worked outside—on trail crews, with Outward Bound and Youth Corps, on conservation biology and restoration projects, peeling logs and grooming ski trails. She hunts and still cooks once a year for a work crew of friends. But until she started Red Ants Pants, or RAP as she calls it, one thing always

plagued her: work pants that either wore out easily or were uncomfortable and actually interfered with working.

After her first detail in the West, in Arizona, she headed for Montana. "People told me I would love Missoula, but it didn't grab me. I tried Bozeman. There are phenomenal manufacturing and design mentors there, but it felt too big. I wanted a small, ag-based town" like the ones she'd grown up in, Calhoun says. Ivan Doig's *This House of Sky* led her to White Sulphur Springs, and she's been there five years. "It's a great, welcoming community. I love that it's a ranching town going off the energy of calving, branding, moving cattle, shipping."

She was already working on RAP when she moved there. After years of lobbying manufacturers like Carhartt for pants for women, the idea came to her to make them herself, and the name Red Ants Pants popped into her head. Only later did a biologist on a job tell her how apt the name was. "In an ant colony," Calhoun smiles, "female ants do all the work."

"I had no experience going in," she says, "No design ▶



background. I knew what I wanted the pants to look like and fit like. And if it fits right, it will be flattering. I had to learn patternmaking and the lingo, grading and marking—all the nitty-gritty. It took eight months from sketches to pulling on the pair that was the final one.” Nor did she have a background in business. “I didn’t know what a business plan was until I read *How to Start Your Own Business for Dummies*.”

Reading such a book in a Bozeman coffee shop, Calhoun chanced upon a lode of advice and experience. “Someone asked her about the book, and I eavesdropped,” says Richard Siberell, a longtime apparel-industry designer who worked with Patagonia and now runs his own design facility in Bozeman. “I said, poor girl, starting her own business; I invited her to call me.” Now Siberell and several industry friends are an unpaid RAP board of advisors. They help Calhoun with practical matters like manufacturing negotiations and big-picture questions of how to grow her business. “She has the desire and the will,” Siberell says.

“She doesn’t give up.”

Ironically, given the importance of localness and authenticity to Calhoun, the pants aren’t made in White Sulphur Springs. They’re not even made in Montana. But they are made in the U.S., a point of pride for Calhoun despite what that means for price: a pair costs \$119. A manufacturing center in Seattle—woman-owned and -operated, by chance—sews them. Calhoun’s patternmaker resides in California; Calhoun met her in person only last year. Few RAP sales take place in the shop; most occur online to customers as far afield as Maine, Australia and Antarctica. It’s not like Calhoun has a choice about making the pants in Montana, not on the scale she needs and not with her budget. After three official years of business, “we’re basically a nonprofit,” she says. In the future, she hopes to make the pants in Montana—and to make a salary.

“One of her biggest strengths is marketing,” Siberell says of Calhoun. The company’s look and feel—its graphics and presentation—are clever,

attractive, young, fun. Calhoun, who comes up with many of the ideas herself or “just sitting around with buddies,” does her own marketing with the help of professionals like Cindy Stillwell, owner of Hybrid Media in Bozeman, who produced RAP’s first commercial for YouTube gratis to pad her own portfolio. The commercial, also available on the RAP website, features three cowgirls using a pair of Red Ants pants to pull some helpless cowboys’ truck from a ditch. The marketing is full of rural themes—and also of humor, the kind so important in work crews, where laughter lightens grueling work and helps pass time. Now those work crews are coed; RAP’s humor, like the banter, has a sexual edge (we’re talking about pants, after all), but RAP keeps it clean and empowered.

“We’re targeting a core customer that I’m part of,” Calhoun says. “That’s a piece missing with these big corporations.” She’s referring to some of the big pants manufacturers, who, after she gave up and started her company, finally introduced women’s lines. “They’re not part of the true clientele who understand need and function.”

Calhoun targets any women she can think of who might need her pants: veterinarians, ceramic artists, sailors, rodeo women. Recently she trailed her retrofitted Airstream, nicknamed the Anthill, to a show for women in the trades in Los Angeles. She sold out in a day and a half. “Those women were as tough as you get—high-rise welders, pile drivers, steelworkers. They’re completely in a man’s world and fighting all the way. Pants become a safety issue. They were so excited.” It’s affirming for Calhoun; she knows her pants cross demographic lines.

A successful new strategy is Tupperware-esque house parties, region by region. Missoula’s Big Sky Brewing provides beer; Calhoun provides pants, a slide show about the company, and, she’s discovered, community. “There’s hooting, hollering, sometimes tears. You get hard-working women together, they commiserate. They appreciate the solution. It becomes a lot more than a pair of pants.” ■

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