

## Boxers to Bombers

I make clothing and packs in the Denver metro area. Being a part of a quickly expanding and vibrant sewing scene is interesting, and occasionally you come face to face with brilliance.

Carla is a local designer that makes a living producing men's underwear. She has designed and constructed a totally unique and bizarre way to make the coolest men's panties that you have ever seen. They sell by word of mouth; no facebook, no website, no catalog, no pictures. You have to know Carla, or know someone, who knows someone... And, as you might expect, she is making them as fast as she can.

It gets better. It turns out that the girlfriends of the guys that are lucky enough to get a pair of Carla's undies like them so much that they steal them and wear the ill-fitting garments themselves. So to keep the better-halves happy she has created a woman's version, with rave reviews. Isn't there something deliciously ironic about a young woman who makes uber cool men's underwear, by herself, and



then gives it the shrink-it-and-pink-it treatment to reach another, shall we say, closely held customer?

Now, to be fair, Carla is in the right place at the right time. Men's underwear is a "hot" trending category right now with a renewed interest across makers and markets. It seems my gender has awoken from decades of tighty-whitey oppression and is now embracing a wave of performance and premium textiles in a range of fits. We are Fruit-of-the-Loom free.

However, what interests me about this story of a young

woman who knows more about men's briefs than any human on earth, and hand makes an unbelievable version of her own, is how well it demonstrates the backbone of apparel. The truth is; it's fun to buy fun clothes from fun people. That simple idea is the foundation of specialty retail.

Fun people and product were in the wheelhouse of Outdoor 1.0. That shop-keeper-as-outdoor-expert formula built an industry on product story and personality. The heirloom outdoor companies were all makers of product; they patterned and cut and sewed their own goods. In

that effort, and without their knowledge, some of themselves was transferred to the garments and goods that they created. You can taste it when you look at their work now, and see it emulated in the sterile reinterpretation of old school flannel camping that is currently flooding the fashion cycle.

When people challenge me over the whole made in the USA thing, I usually respond with Carla's story... and then I tie it into alcohol. Small batch, hand-made, artisan style beer and spirits are the rage. The micro-brewed beer in the liquor store cooler isn't going to replace the Budweiser, but it is going to stand alongside it as an option for the consumer. That is, a more expensive, higher gross margin dollar option. That idea is also part of the specialty retail formula. ●

Disclaimer: Kurt Gray is in some ways the James Thurber of Textile Insight. It goes without saying that his opinions are not necessarily shared by the publisher, or anyone else with an internet connection.