



The Buyer's View



Buyer's View: Fox Creek Leather

Asked to picture an 'American' company and the first thing to spring to mind would probably be a huge conglomerate such as Microsoft, Nike or General Motors, but how truly 'American' are these companies? It is true to say that they all maintain their headquarters in the United States and are headed up by American staff but little, if any, of their production is now carried out in the 'Land of the Free'. This scenario is true across the overwhelming majority of companies that boast huge corporate offices in cities such as New York or in Silicon Valley. However, step outside the big cities and look beyond the shiny buildings and the mirrored office windows and you will find that there are still successful garment makers fighting to maintain the 'Made in America' dream. One such company is Fox Creek Leather.





A slice of Americana nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains

A small, family-owned company, Fox Creek Leather produces and sells leather motorcycle clothing and accessories but, in terms of its set up, it is more reminiscent of the TV family The Waltons than Wal-Mart. Located in the rural and remote Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia the company was started by Paul Trachy on the edge of Fox Creek in the 1970s to supplement his income whilst working as a carpenter. He began selling leather on the road at motorcycle meetings, taking his whole family with him, sometimes for up to a month at a time. It must have been fun though as, 30 years later, his family remains staunchly loyal to him and his company, and they all still work side-by-side.

A long road

However, in spite of this folksy image, it has been no easy task establishing the company as a leader in the highly competitive market of motorbike leathers. If you consider that Trachy and his family have had to compete with iconic names such as Harley Davidson, the enormity of the challenge becomes clear—especially when you are trying to do it out of a barn in rural America. It is equivalent to a new, unheard of sports footwear company trying to take on the likes of Nike or adidas. But Trachy rose to the challenge and spent the first two decades 'burning rubber', travelling relentlessly around the USA and, with the help of a good idea from his son, it has paid off.

Tired of watching his father struggle to keep the business going, when son Pete graduated from college, and returned to the bosom of the company, he insisted on launching the company into Cyberspace. This opened the flood gates, as its high quality products were now available to the masses without Trachy even having to leave the office. As Trachy himself states, "We are rural and remote, our hands on the future but our fannies [bottoms] in the past."

Within a few years, the company's revenue had increased ten-fold thanks to the Internet—and the product line of course—and by 2006 revenues had reached \$2 million. With such a huge increase in turnover and demand, the company had to leave behind its barn with four computers and two outhouses and move to bigger premises. It now employs ten staff at its shipping facility in Virginia, where it also has a small retail outlet, and a further 12 at its production facility in New Jersey.

The secret of success

Its product range has also expanded over the years and the company now offers a wide variety of leather jackets (for both men and women), chaps, waistcoats, belts, saddle bags, tool bags, accessories and luggage, but it all still meets the high demands made by the company's founder. Fox Creek prides itself on offering the best products in terms of quality, fit and durability. It checks the quality of all the leather it uses and will not use anything that it deems sub-standard. It can also keep a close eye on the quality of the finished goods as they are produced in the USA, under the family's watchful eye. It also views itself as a very 'accessible' company as consumers can speak to in-house customer service agents. Furthermore, a blog on the company's website enables clients can post queries which are answered by the family in person. It is this level of service that sets it apart. Can you imagine Bill Gates emailing you when your PC crashes?

The majority of the products are manufactured in either naked or top grain cow hide in varying thicknesses depending on its intended use—i.e. thick leather for jackets and chaps for protection, and thinner and softer cow hide for gloves. ➤





It also offers gloves in deer and elk skin, which are produced in the USA. Although deerskin is one of the most difficult leathers to work with, both in terms of tanning and making up goods, and has a limited supply, Fox Creek goes the extra mile for its customers as it believes that the advantages of using this material far outweigh any inconvenience in sourcing it and finding sufficiently highly-skilled staff to work with it. According to Trachy, when handled properly, deerskin produces one of the strongest, softest, most durable and comfortable gloves available.

A properly cut deerskin glove stretches width-wise but has very little stretch lengthwise, thus producing a snug-fitting glove that expands with the hand when you make a fist or grip something, but with fingers that won't stretch or become floppy—perfect for handling a motor bike. The structure of deerskin is also different from other skins and its elongated interwoven fibres offer an extremely high tear strength and abrasion resistance, whilst the spaces between the fibres make the leather soft and comfortable across a wider range of temperatures, making them cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter—an important consideration for bikers who need to wear gloves all year round.

True to its roots

However large Fox Creek may have

become, it has not forgotten its heritage or its ethics. When the company was set up, all of Fox Creek's apparel and accessories were made in the USA and, unlike the vast majority of companies, this is still the case today, with a small number of exceptions. Since the company's beginnings Trachy has established relationships with the best craftsmen he could find and has maintained these contacts to the present day. The reason for this is three-fold. Domestic manufacturing provides the necessary flexibility to custom make a garment when customers' measurements fall outside standard stock sizes, a service which the company is very proud of, and rightly so, as fit is an essential factor in motorbike clothing for both comfort and safety reasons. Fox Creek also has to protect its interests, as it offers a lifetime guarantee on its products so it cannot afford to constantly deal with returns and faulty goods and, according to Trachy, "We have never found another manufacturer, inside or outside the USA, which can produce our garments to the level of quality that allows us to cover them with a lifetime guarantee."

Finally, the company has a true sense of social responsibility and as it would be difficult to ensure that fair labour practices were being followed at overseas facilities, it chooses not to take that risk. That does not mean that the company is insular and

does not deal with overseas companies. It has established successful relationships with companies in South America and Pakistan, where it sources its leather, and holds supply contracts with six firms. Most of the jacket patterns are also cut in Pakistan and then assembled in the USA.

A pat on the back for Pakistan

This may appear to contradict the company's philosophy, but when asked about this, Trachy told *World Leather*, "The Pakistan connection gives us two things: The best leather we have ever encountered and a great inexpensive pattern cutter. The leather is always perfect. The patterns are perfect. It is one of the most trouble free aspects of our operation." The New Jersey factory is also headed up by a man from Pakistan who co-ordinates everything from the buying through tanning to the pattern cutting. Trachy adds, "He has come up with the tanning process that has given us the best leather we have ever had and laying down specifications has never been an issue." So, whilst the company may have decided to spread its wings in terms of sourcing it still maintains total control. All of the company's other products are made entirely in the USA, with the exception of a few of its gloves, and this goes some way to illustrate why Fox Creek will always remain a true 'All American' company, however big it grows. 🌐