



Photography courtesy Wrangler Western Wear.

*The Wrangler patch is an eternal symbol of the Western lifestyle. For more than a half a century, the authenticity of a cowboy has been measured by a small piece of brown leather.*



## The Jeans That Won The West

BY CORINNE J. BROWN

**A**sk the average American cowboy which jeans he wears and nine out of 10 will answer "Wrangler" without a second's hesitation.

Don't be surprised. Nearly synonymous with the West, few brands in the clothing industry can boast of such total identification with a culture and a lifestyle ~ a testament to one of the most successful products in Western fashion history.

As far as jeans and shirts are concerned, Wrangler Western Wear



*Phil McAdams*

runs steady and deep, creating a core product with continuity, recognition and lots of choices. Their hugely popular core or "patch" jean styles, built around the first, classic 13MWZ ~ Men's With Zipper ~ straight-legged model, were created to suit the lifestyles of Western, equine and farming/ranching customers who buy them exclusively, one jean at a time.

Phil McAdams, president of Wrangler Western Wear since 2002, knows the business inside and out. He's been with the company for 25 years and has worked in several divisions, including merchandising



and account representation. Ke-fined, unassuming and straightforward, McAdams would be as convincing in preppy designer. He projects youthful energy with a no-nonsense style.

"The secret to our success is surprising," he explained during an interview at a Western & English Sales Association trade show. "In spite of the fact that our largest market was originally men, real growth started with the female consumer. We pushed the envelope.

"After all, Western wear has always been about people looking good in lifestyle apparel ... so women were the logical target," he said.

Wrangler can boast the most progressive thinking on the drawing board for women in Western wear. In 1948, the newly named label decided women should be able to have the comfort and ease of a front-zip jean just like men ~ a step in the liberation of the modern cowgirl.

**T**he jeans line progressed to distinct diversification as they customized the cut, color and fit to an astonishing degree. "Regarding our approach to women's styling, we believe in the snowflake theory ~ no two are alike," stated Joe Hertz, Vice President and General Manager of Specialty Apparel for Wrangler.

The offering for women in Wrangler's casual line, *Riata*, includes novelty fabrics and trims, contemporary cuts like low-rise and flare leg styles, and a wide choice of colors and finishes. Recently, *Aura*, a consumer-driven line created for mature women, has swept all sales predictions with soaring numbers.

The jeans complement women of all shapes and sizes ~ more than 120 fits ~ with subtle stretch, and comfortable contour waistlines. For men, the expansion into Wrangler *Rugged Wear* enabled the manufacturer to cross over into the world of the rugged outdoorsman, creating jeans, shirts and jackets for camp-



Photography courtesy the PRCA, photo by Mike Copeman.

*The Wrangler name is synonymous with the Western lifestyle, and the iconic brand can be seen everywhere at Western sporting events like the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.*

ing, hiking and fishing.

A more recent addition for men is *Riggs Workwear*, industrial strength clothing for maximum performance and durability. In addition, a licensing agreement with *Sidran of California* adds versatile outerwear to the total mix.

The youth market is extremely important and is currently the largest growth segment in the company. The now legendary *Twenty X* line of contemporary Western clothing was Wrangler's way of luring back the label-conscious teens who have sought more and more choices in mall stores, even if they lived the Western lifestyle.

Wrangler hoped to attract this important sector and succeeded by creating hip, youth-oriented styles with an on-target logo label.

"It's important that we raise children with brand recognition," McAdams reminds. "We need to catch them when they're young. Kids are more open to change and

easily influenced by trends, but at the same time, deeply committed.

"Peer pressure is important. We saw mass merchandisers' brands in the rodeo arena and knew we had to develop something pertinent to the lifestyle of that important 15-to-24-year-old group in a hurry. *Twenty X* was the answer," he said.

Just how Wrangler worked its way off the saddles of ranch cowboys and into the arenas of high school rodeo is a masterpiece of marketing.

By creating in-store galleries in major Western retail stores with easy-to-find displays, while applying the brand to add-ons like T-shirts, jackets and more, the product suddenly had presence.

Styling ranged from "Slim Fits" to "Extreme Fit," a new looser, more contemporary jean referencing an urban style. Prior to, and following the brand's launch, focus groups held nationwide engaged teens in discussions about fashion preferences, fit, social pressure, comfort,



style, acceptance and every other issue related to clothing. When teens spoke, Wrangler listened.

Following the lead of other successful sports merchandisers, Wrangler connected with youth competition. By becoming a major sponsor of the National High School Rodeo Association and other youth-related organizations, the *Twenty X* brand fused with the popular aspiration of becoming a professional rodeo cowboy, the superstar of the Western sports world.

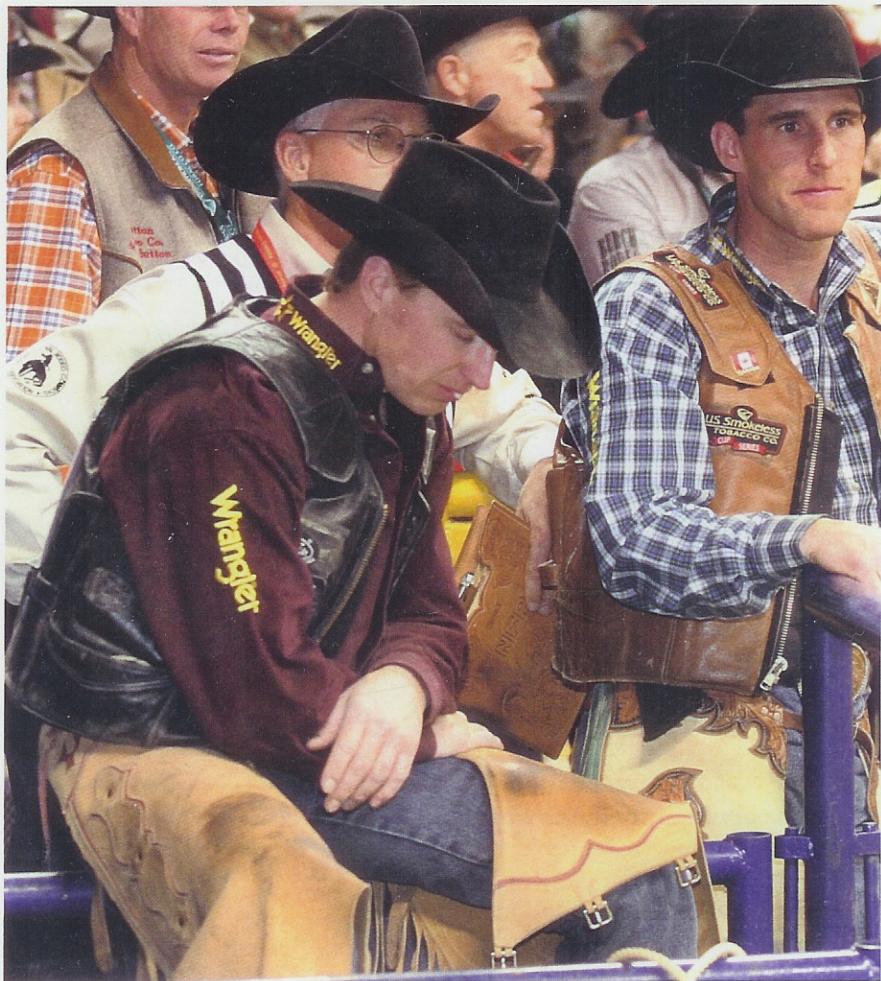
"Sponsorship is a key part of our affiliation with the consumer," McAdams asserted. "We've been with the Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association since 1978. The company pours thousands of dollars into promoting pro rodeo sports, as well as being the title sponsor of the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas each year, the 'super bowl' of pro rodeo."

"With sponsorship comes endorsement and endorsees provide consumer links. Our program includes 100 of the world's top professional rodeo athletes, including legends like Ty Murray, seven-time All-Around World Champion Cowboy, and Joe Beaver, eight-time PRCA Champion," he said.

**W**rangler's history dates to 1945 and the denim manufacturer, Blue Bell. Back then, their overalls and jeans were simply working men's garments, shapeless and baggy.

In an effort to provide a tough, close-fitting pant for the cowboys who rode in New York's Madison Square Garden rodeos, they hired a Philadelphia tailor named Ben Lichtenstein, fondly known as Rodeo Ben, who was already custom-making clothes for Hollywood cowboys. He turned to the athletes for input.

Renowned bronc rider Jim Shoulders, for example, wanted flat seams on the inside that would not chafe his legs, back pockets placed



PRCA photo by Kerri Truckness.

*Wrangler is the Western wear of choice for authentic cowboys. Whether on the ranch or in the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, Wrangler is the only jean made by cowboys, for cowboys.*

higher up on the seat so he wouldn't be sitting on his wallet, a higher rise in the front and longer pant legs that wouldn't ride up over boots, stronger fabric that would both hold and flex, and flat rivets that wouldn't scratch the saddle.

Thanks to Shoulders and others, the fabric weave known today as "broken twill" and at least a dozen other improvements, were incorporated into Wrangler's *Cowboy Cut* 13MWZ jean, the classic, five-pocket, front-zippered, Western denim wardrobe staple worn by many Westerners since before they could walk.

As the basic jean merged into everyday life and became the symbol of the counterculture, film stars like James Dean and alternative

musicians like Bob Dylan and Willie Nelson made jean sales soar.

Levis however, dominated the urban market with its button-front fly and narrow leg. By the time the hippie movement bloomed, those same jeans were often worn ragged and torn, faded, shredded or ripped. Fashion had become political.

Worn jeans expressed a kind of rejection of societal norms and the worse looking the jean, the better. By comparison, the dark, neatly-pressed, indigo jean of the cowboy world appeared snug, starched, and clean, emoting an unsullied, unblemished, tough kind of heroic sex appeal and respectable *machismo*.

Wrangler continued to dress





Photography courtesy the PRCA, photo by Mike Copeman.

*In 1947, the original 13MWZ was made to the specifications of rodeo cowboys like Jim Shoulders. Today, cowboys like seven time PRCA All-Around Champion Trevor Brazile continue the tradition.*

the cowboy consumer and imply cowboy ideals, winning over customers nationwide.

McAdams knows what it takes to stay ahead in a competitive market: product availability, brand visibility, style choices, and a hint of romance. As with many other products, Western wear retailers sell the sizzle along with the steak.

Wrangler ads promote both men and women's products with images that are effectively styled with handsome models who remind us that the West is forever young, no matter how old you are.

"Living in the West can mean a hardworking lifestyle," McAdams explained. "Men like to stay fit and in shape. They feel they look better in a fitted pair of jeans and most do. We found that women think so, too."

Because fashion helps define who we are, our clothes tell much about us. Men who wear Wranglers seem to have authority. As the Wrangler silhouette began to pervade Western culture, showing up quietly on billboards, in photo

anthologies about the American cowboy, and on the stages of the country and Western entertainment world, it's not surprising Western artists began depicting cowboys with a lean and leggy "Wrangler" look, too.

"In addition to our jeans," McAdams added, "Wrangler is one of the biggest shirt makers in the United States. But this market tends to be less brand-loyal. Not everyone notices what shirt you're wearing, while jeans say a lot about you. Launching lifestyle collections, like 20x and the *George Strait Cowboy Cut* collection of shirts and jeans, really fills a need for our consumers."

**N**ew additions to the brand family are keeping Wrangler at the forefront of merchandising. A partnership with the Professional Bull Riders consists of a supporting sponsorship and a licensing agreement.

Most recently, Wrangler announced the Wrangler Concert Series, where the brand partners

with rodeo committees to help draw more rodeo and country music fans.

McAdams explains the company's continued success this way. "We're like a family. The folks at Wrangler know both the consumer and the retailer because we're continually conducting research. We realize the retail environment is changing and to stay current, we address our product development and marketing programs utilizing three teams – one each for contemporary, outdoor and core products."

The company is a model for marketing to a lifestyle market. So, the next time you see that fancy stitched W or the leather rope-embossed, back pocket patch, take another look.

Appreciate the fact that success like this doesn't come easily. The wearing of this brand is done with old-fashioned accountability and creative, hard work ~ the American cowboy way!

*Corinne J. Brown is an award-winning freelance writer and novelist residing in Englewood, Colorado.*