



Fit for Champions

Kaycee Orr-Hoffman and her Bar None Hat Company carry on both tradition and legacy.

by *Wes Ishmael*

*They are lifted high in celebration, humbly doffed in reverence and respect.
They shade a face from sun, wind, dust and snow, fan a bronc and encourage cattle to move or change direction.
They identify, make a statement, share triumph and sorrow.
Some even go to the grave with their owners.
That's a Bar None hat.*

“**A** hat is more than a hat. Not only is it a fashion statement, it’s a tool for the person wearing it,” says Kaycee Orr-Hoffman, who established Bar None Hat Company in 2003. “The grease stains, the sweat stains, it symbolizes the American cowboy. Their work hats get dirty and show so much character. It shows their lifestyle and where they come from.

“I had always wanted to learn how to make hats. The whole idea of using your hands and creating something that is an artifact of the person who is going to wear it was very intriguing to me.”

Kaycee’s desire to learn and her deep family roots in the Western way of life inspired her to become a hat maker, or a hatter as they’re called in the trade.

Legacies and whatnot

First the roots. Kaycee was the fifth generation to grow up on her family’s Colorado ranch.

Orr is a name widely known in the Hereford business, but the legacy began with Kaycee’s great-great-grandfather, Fred Deberard of Kremmling, Colo. He was an influential Hereford breeder who bred Advance Domino 20 and Advance Domino 54. In 1934, he sold those bulls to the U.S. Range Experiment Station at Miles City, Mont. They became the foundation sires of Line 1 Herefords.

Bar None is Kaycee’s family brand that dates back to the 1800’s

Deberard believed in using the showing — carloads of bulls and feeder calf pens — to advertise and market his operation. Those endeavors were hugely successful and carried on by Jack Orr — Kaycee’s grandfather — an influential Hereford breeder in his own right.

The lining of every Bar None hat is purple, her grandpa Orr’s favorite color because it was reserved for champions.

Both Fred Deberard and Jack Orr are members of the Hereford Hall of Fame.

Kaycee married Jason Hoffman, of Hoffman Ranch, Thedford, Neb. His parents, Denny and Dixie Hoffman, began establishing the family’s own Hereford legacy in 1957.

Learning the ropes

Hat making — hatting — is a trade of secrets. More specifically, it’s mainly a good ol’ boys’ club of carefully guarded knowledge. It’s near impossible to get anyone to teach you, never mind the fact that the manufacturing of essential equipment — much of it from Europe — ceased almost a century ago.

That’s where two of Kaycee’s aunts came in — Collene and Susie. Both were hatters; one still is.

In 1985, Susie purchased Greeley Hat Shop, which was subsequently renamed Greeley Hat Works when she sold it in 1996.

Freshly graduated from Colorado State University in 2003 with a degree in ag business, Kaycee had a desk job. She hated it. So, she figured that was the perfect time to learn hatting from her aunts. Colleen located some left-over equipment that an old hat maker in Lubbock, Texas, was willing to sell. Kaycee set up shop in her parents' barn and started piecing together her hat making education and business, which is now located in Thedford.

Mapping the head

You likely know your hat size, and it's likely close to your actual size. When you order a Bar None hat, Kaycee gets an exact measurement. Just as important, she obtains a precise pattern of your head shape, using a vintage contraption called a conformateur, made in Paris, France, at the turn of the last century. Like fingerprints, no two head shapes are identical.

Next, the client chooses the hat color and quality. Kaycee offers four different levels of quality based on how much of the felt is comprised of beaver, versus rabbit fur. Beaver is more acclimated to water, of course. The more beaver in the hat, the lighter and longer lasting it will be. They also hold a shape better.

Bar None's 10X is made of mostly rabbit fur. 20X is mostly rabbit fur but also contains some beaver. 50X is half rabbit and half beaver. 100X is pure beaver — the Cadillac of hats.

Incidentally, the "X" system used to denote hat quality — the amount of beaver — is neither regulated nor standardized. You can stamp as many X's on a hat as you want. While more X's mean more quality, the system only has meaning relative to the individual or company making the hat. For instance, a 1000X hat from a brand-name hat manufacturer is higher quality than its 100X. But a 100X Bar None hat can be of the same or greater quality as the big-boy hat stamped with 1000X.

Understandably, price increases with quality. Generally speaking, Bar None prices range from \$350 to \$1,000. Besides quality, price varies with such things as hat band choice.

Kaycee numbers every Bar None hat and stamps the customer's name on the leather sweatband. Each one leaves the shop with a \$2 bill tucked inside as a wish that the owner will never go broke. She got the idea from a customer a decade ago who walked into the shop, slapped a \$2 bill on the counter and expressed the same wish to Kaycee.

Steps to perfection

After documenting the aforementioned particulars, Kaycee starts with what's called a hat blank.

Think here of a flimsy, hairy piece of felt consisting of the brim and crown. All of Bar None's blanks come from the same company in Winchester, Tenn., the only remaining source in the United States.

"Hat making includes a lot of heating, cooling and sanding," Kaycee says, explaining the process. Steps include blocking the crown, when she begins fitting the unique head shape into the hat, trimming the brim to customer specifications, sewing in the sweatband and attaching the hat band.

The final step is hand-creasing the hat, which is one more way to tailor the look and feel. Conversely, she explains mass-hat producers use mammoth presses that essentially stamp a crease into the hat.

Cowboys and others

Making each Bar None hat takes eight to 10 hours. Given the heating and cooling required, Kaycee explains she works on more than one hat at a time. She turns out about 100 hats annually.

Kaycee and Jason have a son, Haxton (11), and daughters, Kennedy (9) and Hayden (7). She has begun easing them into the hat making process. When they want a new hat, they must help her make it. They put their old hats up for sale. If they sell, they split the profit with Mom.

Kaycee's primary clientele are working cowboys in the area, but there are occasional courtiers of fame.

For instance, one client was running to be governor of Nebraska. When she numbered his hat, it was 1776. Unfortunately for him, the mojo failed to carry over to election day.

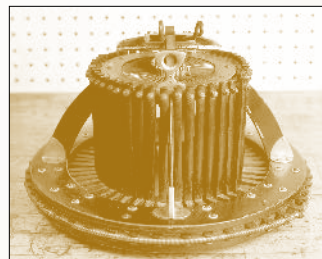
One of her favorite stories is about two strangers traveling by plane from California. One man complimented another one on his hat. "It's a Bar None," said the man, taking it off to proudly show the name on the sweatband. "So is mine," explained the other one.

Word of mouth is the primary way Bar None hats are marketed.

"Hats have so much meaning — the color, the shape, how you wear them. It's a lot of the person who is wearing it," Kaycee says. "With each hat that goes out the door, there's a piece of me that goes with it. There aren't 100 other workers involved; it comes down to me. It brings me great joy." **HW**



Blocking is the process where Kaycee begins working the owner's unique head shape into the hat.



Kaycee uses this rare piece of equipment — a conformateur — to transfer each person's unique head shape to his/her hat.