

# Mass a-peel

How Banana Republic turned military-safari into a fashion hit

## Wild Company The Untold Story of Banana Republic

by Mel and Patricia Ziegler  
Simon & Schuster

by PETER HELLMAN

It was the autumn of 1978, and Mel and Patricia Ziegler, children of the counter-cultural 1960s, had both quit their jobs at the San Francisco Chronicle, he as a journalist, she as an illustrator. They rented a shack in woodsy Mill Valley, north of San Francisco. To generate a bit of income, Patricia sold clothing at a weekend flea market. But not just any clothing. Equipped with an offbeat fashion sense and strong sewing skills, she cleverly tweaked up old khaki duds bought by the musty bundle from military surplus dealers. For a certain kind of customer, a vintage army jacket, first thoroughly laundered and then snazzed up with new suede elbow patches and

handsome wood buttons, was a welcome escape from mass-market mall fashion.

The Zieglers sunk their savings of \$1,500 into a lease on a small retail shop in a not-very-prime Mill Valley location. To cut costs, they shared the \$250 rent with an aikido studio, which held classes on the shop's balcony. The sign over the door, bearing a pair of bananas enclosing a star, grandly announced "Banana Republic." In a stroke of marketing acumen, the couple repositioned their small inventory of military surplus as "safari wear." Even if a customer had little hope of ever going on safari, she could day-dream of elephant stalking.

Fearing (correctly) that scant foot traffic would pass by their new shop, the Zieglers also produced 400 copies of a small catalog. The images were simply drawn by Patricia. Mel, self-appointed Minister of Propaganda, penned tongue-in-cheek tales for each item that extracted delight from defects. Those too-short sleeves on a batch of ancient Spanish infantry shirts? Chalk it up to dictator Francisco Franco's "distrust of short-



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**Banana Republic co-founder Mel Ziegler (right) with Gap head Don Fisher amid the safari suits.**

armed soldiers." The missing hoods on a cache of beautifully made Italian silk camouflage jackets? "Our man in Milan tells us that they have been on back order from the Turin factory since 1949. The strike is not yet settled."

Doubling up as Minister of Mailing, Mel typed each address label on an IBM Selectric and licked the 18 cent stamps.

Just one sale was rung up on the shop's opening day: a Swedish gas-mask bag priced at \$6.50. Actually, it wasn't rung up, because when the customer paid with a \$20 bill, Patricia realized the shop had no cash register.

But soon, thanks to a spate of adoring press stories about this quirky new shop and its free-spirited young proprietors, Banana Republic took off. Over the next decade, the company grew into a nearly-100 store empire grossing over \$200 million.

That heady expansion was paid for from the deep pockets of Gap, which acquired the fledgling firm in 1983. Built on blue jeans, Gap was looking

to juice up a fresh concept. Cheeky little Banana Republic was just the ticket. While their business could be bought, the Zieglers insisted that their autonomy was not for sale. That suited Don Fisher, Gap's founder and CEO. Along with an undisclosed number of shares in his own company, Fisher gave the couple full reign in running Banana Republic. "I wouldn't know how to run your company," he told them. "It depends on your ideas and your creativity."

The synergy worked well for a while. Patricia ruled over design, while Mel guided the business side. Banana Republic stores popped up everywhere from a staid Palo Alto shopping center to a corner opposite Bloomingdale's in Midtown Manhattan. Nobody had seen retailing presented like this: WWII Army jeeps careening out of display windows and full-size giraffe mannequins poked their heads through ceilings.

It was huge fun, and hugely profitable. But tensions started to simmer when the Zieglers added both travel bookshops and a travel magazine to their domain. What did that have to do with selling clothes, wondered Bob Fisher, one of Don's sons, who had been inserted into Banana Republic's executive office by his strong-willed father. Worse, Bob began to second-guess Patricia's fashion decisions. In 1987, as Banana Republic's sales growth slowed, Gap got a hard-charging new CEO: Millard "Mickey" Drexler.

Drexler lost no time in clashing with the equally strong-willed Zieglers, whose autonomy he did not value at the expense of his own. They sold their shares back to the Gap for an undisclosed sum. With their son, Zio (daughter Aza arrived three years later), the couple retreated to an old house on a slope high over Mill Valley. Back in action a few years later, they and a partner created a high-end tea company called Republic of Tea (to great success) and a clothing company called ZoZa (a failure).

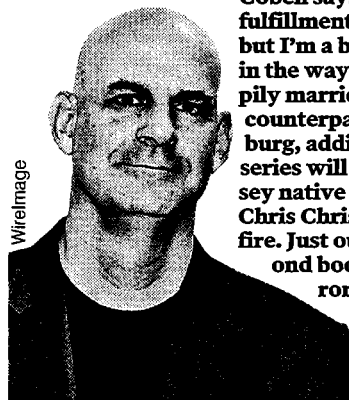
Years after the Ziegler's stomped out of Banana Republic, Don Fischer was heard to tell a mutual friend that he could have made the Zieglers "very rich" had they bent to the lash of Mickey Drexler. Mel's response: "Very rich is not what we wanted. We just wanted to live our lives on our terms. That is what we got."

A personal note: I'd met Mel Ziegler, a fellow freelance writer in New York shortly before he decamped for San Francisco. I visited him and met Patricia in Mill Valley on the day they signed the lease for their first shop. "Do not call it Banana Republic," I warned them. They needed to come up with a less edgy name, lest people from real banana republics take offense and trash their shop.

Wisely, the Zieglers didn't listen to me — or anyone else.

## IN MY LIBRARY

### Harlan Coben



WireImage

As Flaubert famously replied, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi!" Of Myron Bolitar, the hero of Harlan Coben's best-selling mysteries ("Drop Shot," "Fade Away"), Coben says, "He's kind of me, with wish fulfillment. He's faster, funnier, smarter, but I'm a better dancer and slightly wiser in the ways of women." Indeed, the happily married father of four compares his counterpart's love life to the Hindenburg, adding, "When he's too happy, the series will be over!" Luckily, the New Jersey native — and childhood pal of Gov. Chris Christie — has other irons in the fire. Just out is "Seconds Away," the second book in his YA series about Myron's nephew, Mickey, who Coben says has problems real kids — like his own — can relate to. Here's what's in his library. —Barbara Hoffman

### Those We Love Most by Lee Woodruff

When someone sends me an advance copy, I usually go "Oy!" But Woodruff's novel is the best debut I've read this year. It's a breathtaking, heartbreaking story of family, betrayal, love, forgiveness and tragedy in the aftermath of a family crisis. When I turned the last page, I found myself missing the characters already.

### The Happiness Project by Gretchen Rubin

I'm not a fan of self-help books — how can something be "self-help" if the book itself is purportedly helping you? — but imagine the brightest girl in your class spending a year researching the question, "What makes us happy?" and then writing a concise, clear, practical book on her findings. Also try her newest: "Happier at Home."



### Gone Baby Gone by Dennis Lehane

Dennis and I sort of started together. We did a book tour in the San Francisco area in 1998, and hardly anybody showed up! If I had to pick just one of his books, it's this. Gritty, violent, moving and written by an angel touched by the gods, it's probably the best crime novel written in the past two decades.

### Marathon Man by William Goldman

Before I lost my father at a fairly young age, he gave me this book and we both adored it. Reading it as a teen, I was so enthralled I wouldn't put it down if you put a gun to my head. The suspense was excruciating! I think that's when I realized that this was what I wanted to do — keep people up all night turning pages so fast their fingers burn.

