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Swannie with style

By: CARRINGTON Sue

William Broome, creator of the Swannndri, would probably be surprised that one of New Zealand's leading fashion designers has turned his bush shirt label into a must-have for city folk, but he would be proud that the relationship means the classic name will live on beyond the 100-year mark it is fast approaching. SUE CARRINGTON reports

ASWANNDRI is one of those things that, if you haven't had one, you've probably always wanted one. Now there's even more reason to own a "swanni" -- Karen Walker.

Swannndri started in Taranaki in 1913 and now it's moved into the High Street of fashion.

Starting in New Plymouth, English mercer (a dealer in textile fabrics) William Broome designed the Swannndri, using a secret weatherproofing formula, to keep bushmen and farmers warm and dry. The shirt became a Kiwi icon.

Broome set up shop on the corner of Devon and Liardet streets in New Plymouth, calling it Broome and Lynch, with the Swannndris made upstairs.

After the shirts were sewn they were sent home to Huatoki St to be immersed in water and the secret formula. They would be left to soak for two days and would often shrink, so it was one size fits all (Broome never being quite sure what size they would turn out). For many years a Swannndri dummy stood outside the shop to show the shirt's durability.

In 1964, John McKendrick bought the Swannndri range and continued to make the shirts in his Waitara factory under the name John Mack Ltd. It was McKendrick who introduced pre-shrunk fabric, which did away with the time-consuming hands-on process.

In 1975, Alliance Textiles bought the trademark and in 2004 Swannndri New Zealand Ltd bought out Alliance.

Chief executive Julian Bowden says the philosophy of making the best performance-based work-wear to outfit the rural and industrial markets in New Zealand has not changed.

Swannndri has more than 70 styles available, with the long bush shirt -- called Original -- still the most popular. Around 3000 Originals are sold each year.

This year top fashion designer Karen Walker was brought in to design Swannndri clothing and accessories for her winter range, which has impacted hugely on the Swannndri business.

"The Swannndri by Karen Walker Collection has been a fantastic addition to our business," says Bowden. "It has certainly helped develop our range and make more Swannndri products relevant to more people. The business has experienced over 25% growth in the last 12 months.

"Swannndri has always been popular with Kiwis. Its roots are, however, entrenched in rural New Zealand. The idea of bringing the brand to town was an easy and logical step.

"The move to the high street is not about fashion. It is about making our range of great product

available to more New Zealanders. Our vision in working with Karen was to develop a range of products whose inspiration came out of everything that is great about Swannndri. The products perform, they are functional and they are of high quality.

"Karen has basically looked at our brand and its values and re-interpreted this into a collection of fantastic pieces that will look better the older they get, just like your swanni," Bowden says.

Swannndri currently does 90% of its business in New Zealand. Export business is dominated by sales to the United Kingdom and Europe.

"A lot of people think Swannndri is only bush shirts," says Bowden. "Our move into the cities has shown that this is not the case and plenty of city folk are buying products out of our Swannndri range and the Swannndri by Karen Walker range."

Karen Walker's Swannndri collection 2006 winter range features woollen knitwear, soft cashmere scarves and cotton shirts and T-shirts for women and men. Coats and jackets feature prominently in the collection. There are timeless trench coats in nylons and cottons, jackets in moleskins and flannels and classic checks on outer flannels and collar trim. The look is classic and stylish.

Walker has used a finer Micron wool so it is softer, but the iconic check and designs look familiar.

As well as clothing, the traditional Swannndri bush shirt flannel in check and plain has been transformed into a chic luggage collection featuring tote bags and overnight and computer bags to complement the clothing range.

"The collection is inspired by Swannndri's place in New Zealand history and honours that heritage with the highest quality design, style, material and functionality," says Walker.

So has fashion moved the Swannndri away from its roots?

"I guess our overall feeling is that the brand is alive again and people are talking about it and the products we are developing," says Bowden.

They are talking about the fact that Karen Walker, New Zealand's premier designer, is working with New Zealand's heritage clothing brand to come up with something new and exciting. *

CAPTION:

Karen Walker's Swannndri range includes this men's trench/duffle coat with check pattern and detailing inside.

This 1930s-style jacket has been reproduced in Karen Walker's range with a finer, softer wool for comfort, but still using the traditional design features.

The Walker range includes cashmere scarves and accessories using the bold check design.

Swannndri has added Muckboots to its range. It's a thermal gumboot with the comfort of a running shoe.

A fantastic weekend bag by Karen Walker is one of the many bags in her Swannndri range, made with sturdy woollen fabric to last for years.

Karen Walker tees have proven popular. This one has a swan pattern and pays tribute to the No 8 wire tradition.

The classic bush shirt, called the Original, is still Swannndri's most popular item.

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