

THE
W.S. BADGER
COMPANY



Producer ^{OF THE} *Month*

MAY 2020



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer OF THE *Month*

by Ruth Garbus



KINDNESS IS THEIR COMPASS

I had to do my research for this month's Producer of the Month, Badger Balm, at a distance, but the power of this company to inspire and connect came through nonetheless. I had a great phone conversation with Bill Whyte, Badger's founder; received eloquent answers from other members of the family leadership team via email; and found a treasure trove of information and inspiration on the Badger Balm website—I daresay Badger is the perfect Producer of the Month to feature during a global pandemic. I've learned that this local company, based in Gilsum, NH, is helping lead the way internationally towards a better, kinder economy, one that gives back to the earth, builds connections and cooperation, and redefines success for the 21st century.

In our phone conversation, I learned that Bill didn't take the typical path to being the founder of a successful business. Now in his early seventies, when I asked him if he'd

always had entrepreneurial tendencies (as so many business owners do), he said no: he was already convinced as a little boy that he'd never own a business, after a failed lemonade stand attempt growing up on Long Island. He graduated second-to-last in his high school class, and told me he suffered from low self-esteem and lack of focus as a young person. But some seeds were planted along the way. For instance, in his early twenties, Bill had the chance to attend a workshop that addressed the creativity-stifling dynamics that tend to arise in businesses. Attendees were only allowed to start sentences with "I wish that..." or "How could we...?" The simple shift of language and perspective was like magic—it opened worlds of possibility, inside and out. Though the idea of Badger was still a couple decades away, this was an important lesson he never forgot.

By the time he created his first salve in order to sooth his chapped, tradesman's hands, Bill had built a

career as a carpenter and started a family with his wife Katie Schwerin, with many different jobs and much life experience under his belt. When he finally took the leap to making Badger Balm his only source of income, he knew he had a sure-fire fall-back plan—"I knew I could always be a cab driver again," he said. "I loved it!" In the beginning Bill did everything himself, from deliveries to bookkeeping, his only business plan to "go like hell until you can support your family." Over time he hired his first employee, James (who still works at the company today, now as Production Manager), quit carpentry, moved operations to a separate building ("an old, haunted place in Gilsum"), hired more employees - the business grew and grew. Two and a half decades later, and with a lot of help from his wife and daughters in the process, Badger Balm now has a staff of 90 people, a brand new custom-designed, state-of-the-art facility, and ships their products to over 25 countries all over the



globe. In 2018 Bill stepped aside in his official capacity as the head of the business, handing over leadership to his two daughters, Emily Schwerin-Whyte and Rebecca Hamilton, at the helm as co-CEO's, and Katie as COO. Now Badger is governed by an eight-person "consensus group," in which Bill is just one of many voices.

It was in 2003 that Badger purchased the land upon which their new production facility, laboratory, shipping center, and open-concept office were built (though construction didn't begin until a few years later). And, true to their principles, it was designed to be much more than just a factory. With a budget that included compost and soil testing, they transformed the grounds from a lifeless sandlot to a fertile garden. Watching the production videos on the Badger website (which are like candy for someone like myself who grew up on Mr. Rogers!), you can see a glorious combination of high-technology and homesteader's sensibility. In one segment, Rebecca narrates from the factory floor in full laboratory gear, long white coat and all, surrounded by giant stainless steel vats and beakers of precious oils,

as their Sport Sunscreen is created from just five simple ingredients: organic sunflower oil, organic beeswax, organic jojoba oil and sunflower vitamin E. In another clip, staff-member Doug attends to the gleaming automated manufacturing line that can produce 10,000 tubes of their Cocoa Butter Lip Balm in one day. It takes care of virtually every detail of the process, from sensing the correct position of the caps, melting the tops of the cooled sticks of balm ever so slightly to get rid of imperfections, and perfectly sticking multiple tubes at one time. It's a long ways off from the years it took Bill to go through that original order of 10,000 tins. But the cafeteria (where all staff is fed an organic lunch each day), the open-concept offices, and the Calendula Childcare Center (Katie's creation, it provides affordable childcare for staff and local residents) are warm and homey with natural timber and light. Outside, biodynamic vegetable and herb gardens flourish, and flowers bloom near a meditation labyrinth.

Badger has been a principled business from the beginning, with financial gain being only one of many

priorities. But becoming a certified B-Corp, which, led by Rebecca, they did in 2011, forced them to attach metrics and long-term planning to their good intentions. Badger is doing important work to encourage a shift from an aggressively competitive economic model to one reliant on connectivity, mutual support, and life-generating environmental and labor practices. Much like our Brattleboro Food Co-op, where we measure not just profit and loss but also waste streams, energy usage, and organic, local, and fair trade sales, B-Corps investigate their environmental impact, their employee support, and how they're contributing to a just economic system. Being a B-Corp also encourages outreach beyond the factory floor, and Badger pushes their kind agenda forward on many fronts: in their packaging, their supply chain, and their support of state and national legislation efforts. With an education in ethnobotany, Rebecca draws a clear line from her studies to the success of Badger's business practices. Her TED-style talk at the 2017 B-Corp conference, which you can view on the Badger website, is enlightening.

She discusses the interplay between Darwin's theory of natural selection, and the Industrial Revolution, which arose around the same time and were based on similar philosophical foundations - many business leaders of the day used his idea of "survival of the fittest" to morally justify their exploitative practices. But Darwin missed something essential: he was never able to explain the first, giant evolutionary leap from single-celled organisms to the multi-celled organisms which are the basis of life as we define it. Rebecca explains that the theory of Margulian evolution, developed during the 1960's, fills in this blank. Lyn Margulis posited that something called "sybiogenesis" is responsible for this progression, which, in contrast to the individualistic theory of natural selection, operates through cooperation and interconnectedness. Rebecca draws a fascinating connection between needing to update our economic and evolutionary philosophies, and makes the case that a business model based on these qualities is not only kinder to our planet and its people, but is also more likely to succeed. The Badger Company bears this out.

Each of the ingredients in Badger products has a story behind it...well, the ingredients in any product tell a story, but the stories that Badger's tell are filled with hope, beauty, wisdom, and inspiration. On their website you can view misty fields of Damascus roses in Bulgaria, and argan fruits being hand-collected by the women of Cooperative Al Amal in Morocco, which both get processed into precious oils for use in Badger's luxurious face care line; and the Solar Romero estate in Andalusia, Spain that produces the organic extra virgin olive oil that forms the basis for many of their products, which has been owned and operated by the same family for seven generations. It's these



producers, and the relationships Badger's sourcers (or "sourcerers," as Bill calls them) have cultivated with them, that form the bedrock of Badger, which, though we don't eat their products (although hearing about their olive oil producer made me sort of tempted) is, in effect, an agricultural company. An important focus for Badger now is regenerative agriculture. In Emily's words: "We currently use organic ingredients, which are great, but if every ingredient could be a regenerative ingredient—it would mean there was a positive impact to the earth from the farming practices we were supporting through our purchasing choices. With regenerative farming, the soil is improved rather than depleted, and the practices capture carbon in the soil, rather than releasing CO2 into the atmosphere...our vision [is to] improve our packaging and ingredients to the point where each Badger product gives back more than it takes from our environment." Step by step, they're getting there. On the short-term horizon are two clear steps in this direction— by the time this article is published, solar panels will be installed on the Badger factory roof, and a ground-mounted solar field will be nearly constructed. And they've also just launched their first sunscreen in a tin, which means one less product packaged in plastic. This will also be the first in their sunscreen line to be certified Protect

Land + Sea, which means it's been guaranteed through testing not to contain any ingredients that harm coral reefs.

I was gratified to hear about how intertwined Badger's history is with our Co-op's. In Emily's words: "As children, we shopped at the Brattleboro Food Co-op, and my parents were members. I remember...bagging up bulk goods, and the excitement of getting carob-covered rice cakes as a treat. Then, when my dad started Badger, he bought bulk olive oil from the co-op to make early batches of our products before we were big enough to order directly from the distributors. And co-ops were some of the earliest stores to carry our products."

During our conversation, Bill told me about a dream he had a while ago, in which a comet, dubbed The Rainbow Comet, was on course to intersect with our planet. People were panicking and preparing their bunkers, arming themselves against a destructive blow. But in the dream the comet didn't hit our planet - it came so close that everything and everyone on Earth passed through its multicolored tail. And when we did, it transformed us: it made us kind. To me, this is a wonderful illustration of how Badger has reacted to each challenge with a vision of a kind and beautiful future. And it's also a healing image of the potential, in this wild moment in our history, to face our troubles with a bright, gentle, Utopian spirit. Badger has been one of my favorite companies for a long time, and after writing this piece I believe in their business all the more. I encourage you to visit the Wellness aisles to purchase their products (or request them as part of your curbside orders), visit their website to learn more, and to be awake to the opportunities to choose kindness in this time! 