

MADE / NORTH ST. BAGS

WORDS AND PHOTOS
BY ADAM NEWMAN



With a background in theater stage and set design, Curtis Williams bounced around a bit before landing in Portland, Oregon, home to creative entrepreneurs of all types, especially in the bike industry. Now his brand employs seven in its Portland workshop and recently celebrated its fifth anniversary.

The small shop designs, cuts, sews and ships all of its products from the location, making each product one at a time by hand and earning its “Made in the USA” tag. While many hand-made bag brands popped up during the messenger bag explosion in the mid 2000s, North St. Bags started with its trademark convertible backpack pannier.

“We’re trying to source all of our materials from U.S. manufacturers,” Williams said. “We’re trying to keep the supply chain as simple and sustainable as possible.” For example, the early bags used vinyl liners to keep them waterproof, but the material is heavy and not environmentally friendly, so Williams found a material called X-pac that is a type of heavy, nylon sailcloth that they order specially from the manufacturer. Panels of the Cordura outers are measured and cut by hand, and the scraps are sent to an arts and crafts supply recycler.

There are eight sewing machines on the production line, and each is dedicated to a specific seam or step in assembly, so no time is wasted re-setting a machine for a different task. Some smaller items like straps are modular, so that the same piece can be used on more than one finished bag. This allows them to pre-assemble some of the pieces and minimize production time, but a bag can take still 90 minutes or more to make.

Bags are mostly sewn to order, though Williams is starting to keep small production runs of a half-dozen or so stock colors as the room to warehouse completed items allows. In the Portland office there are a few dozen bags that are available to ship immediately or for walk-in customers. Someday he hopes to open a full retail store at the location.

Because the bags are made by hand, customers can add custom touches, like adding internal organizers, or can even order fully custom colors if they’re willing to be a little patient while their bag is made by hand. For example, some bike shops will order custom production runs of bags in their shop colors.

North St. Bags guarantees all its products for life, so there are occasionally repairs that come through the office, and Williams uses these to learn how the products are wearing or even failing, and uses that information to make improvements. The original North St. bag, the convertible Woodward backpack and pannier, has evolved slightly over the years through this process.

“We want to make sure they last a long time and stay in use,” Williams said. “Instead of being forgotten in a closet somewhere.” The company introduced a program last year whereby customers can save 20 percent on North St. Bags by trading in their old panniers which are then donated to Portland’s Community Cycling Center “Create a Commuter” program for low income bike commuters.

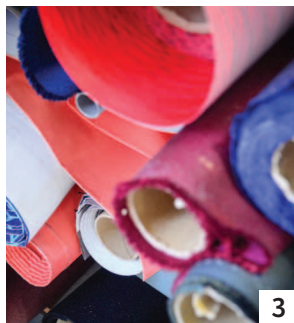
The North St. Bag line continues to expand with bicycle accessories like saddle covers (a must-have here in rainy Portland), wallets, tool rolls and ankle straps, as well as beyond with pieces like laptop sleeves and daypacks. Williams says he plans to introduce more products for commuting, touring and bike camping in the coming year.



1



2



3



4



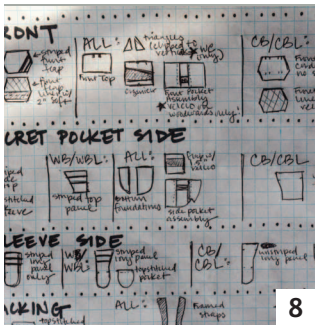
5



6



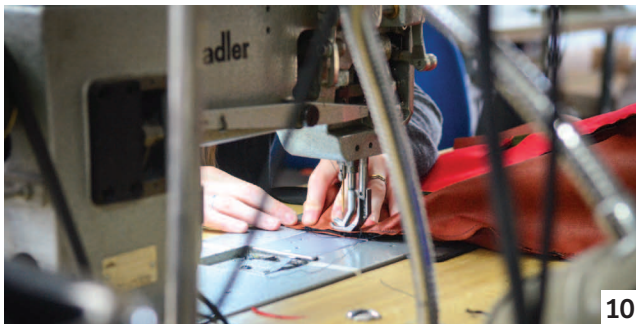
7



8



9



10



11



1. Cordura panels are pre-cut in batches and then assembled only after an order has been placed.
2. Each bag is cut and sewn by hand, one at a time, in the Portland workshop.
3. The raw materials of the bags are special-ordered in bulk.
4. Curtis Williams.
5. Dan Reynolds cuts some of the raw Cordura from a bolt.
6. Sewers move from station to station for each step in the assembly process. Here, Grace Loring installs the liner in one of the bags.
7. Panels are pre-sewn in batches to expedite the assembly process.
8. Assembly instructions.
9. The Portland workshop is tidy but cramped. They hope to find the room to expand and add a retail showroom soon.
10. Grace Loring, sewing.
11. More pre-cut Cordura panels.