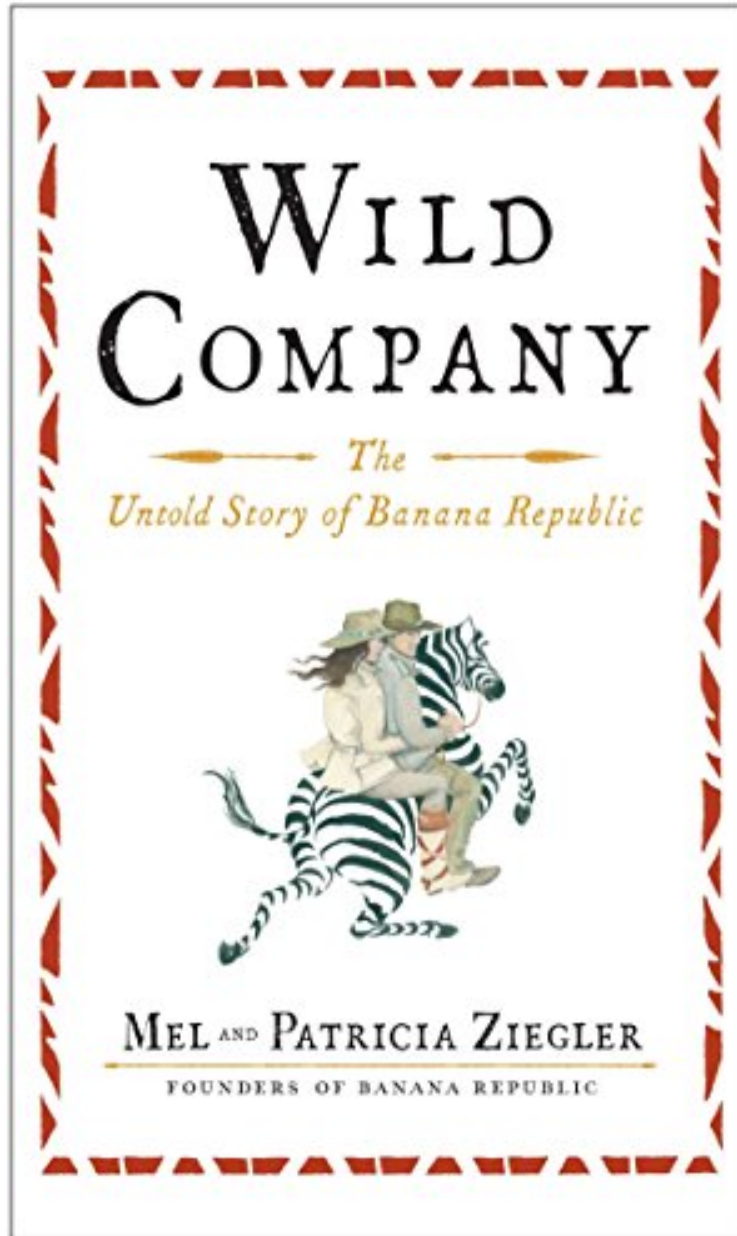


[Free] Wild Company: The Untold Story of Banana Republic

## Wild Company: The Untold Story of Banana Republic

*Mel Ziegler, Patricia Ziegler*

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**Mel Ziegler, Patricia Ziegler : Wild Company: The Untold Story of Banana Republic** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Wild Company: The Untold Story of Banana Republic:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. "We don't take a trip, a trip takes us"By Captain BertA beautiful

book in every way. I would assume that most of us who were Banana Republicans, (doesn't quite work, does it?) know the story or perhaps parts of it. Mel and Patricia Ziegler tell us the rest. I won't go into a synopsis but will instead comment on what made this such a Great Saturday afternoon read...First off major kudos to both Marlyn Dantes for her clean and enticing cover design, mirroring what could be a modern minimalist version of a Banana Republic catalog, and Ruth Lee-Mui for the book design. The use of 2 different fonts in the copy, serif for Mel's words and sans-serif for Patricia's, worked beautifully and allowed for a fun and enticing read. As an avid reader of each catalogue that came into my mailbox, the stories and art took me to imaginary but real places at a time when I had just returned from a stint in the Peace Corps in West Africa. Interestingly enough, the only way to get clothing there was to have it made. My good buddy, Lambo brought a pair of surplus cargo shorts that we gave to a tailor along with a few yards of British khaki from the market and voila, we had an endless supply of the coolest shorts we could imagine.

Idquo;gotrdquo; Banana Republic from day one and still have those catalogues as well as the inaugural issue of Trips. Remember that?? I had forgotten about it myself until Mel's story on page 171. I searched for it in the garage this afternoon and cherish it once again. Truth is, I venture into the BR store at the local mall about once a year, somehow hoping to find something, anything that speaks to the real past. I am sure I am not the only one, just give me a simple die cast Jeep with the BR logo on the door for sale, if not, then a Safari Coat if you please. If you do, I may have a look at your merchandise, but alas the time for Mel and Patricia's Banana Republic is past and I thank them for all they did to bring it to us. As I was reaching the end of Wild Company, the sun was setting and the orange glow on the final pages was in synch with first Mel, and then Patricia's denouement. I almost wanted to read the book all over again, just to relive their adventure one more time. Idquo;Choices are hidden in the pace of the day. Intentions are hidden in choicesrdquo; - Patricia Ziegler. Read this book, if you loved Banana Republic, you will love Wild Company. Wild Company gets the coveted Idquo;Boomer Bert Award of Excellencerdquo;, a true work of art, just as Banana Republic once was...7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. "Magic realism"--Wild Company By Robert A. Hardin If fiction, it would be called "magic realism," but "Wild Company" is a real story with a magical plot: Sympathetic characters (two talented, attractive young journalists) struggle against great odds (no money or business experience) to achieve a worthwhile goal (creative and financial independence). The result, readers know going in, is an against-the-grain company called--in one of many inspired moments--"Banana Republic," iconic in its heyday for outfitting a youthful generation in creative style for vicarious safaris. Just how audacious, shaky and danger-filled this sartorial adventure was will entertain readers, ranging from those nostalgic for a rapidly receding era to the newest business school student seeking inspiration for the future. Considering that Mel and Patricia Ziegler quit dream jobs to go into business with no idea what that business might be, "Wild Company" is an aptly titled tale that asks: just how many obstacles can mere love, determination and talent overcome? And on this safari the endless obstacles are as real and dangerous as Serengeti tigers or crocodiles: floods, deadlines, shysters, burglars, robbers, bank turn downs--all the perils and predators of commerce lined up and waiting. But as in magic fiction, the heroes are given special powers: she is an artist whose eye for fashion is backed by talent with needle and thread as well as pen, capable of re-fashioning short-sleeve Spanish army shirts into must-have haberdashery. His quirky writer's mind thinks outside boxes not yet invented, soaring to dizzying heights in telling catalog readers just how Spain (and other countries) could so err in labeling such treasures "surplus." And of course there's an Open Sesame moment: Mel, on assignment in a far-off land happens to buy a discarded army jacket which Patricia, on seeing a "new Mel" at San Francisco's airport, instantly identifies as the key to their quest. Great read, I loved it--comes at a time when inspiration is needed. #1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Fast Times in the Republic By Fred Kiesche Wild Company is the tale of how two people left their unsatisfying jobs, created something they really weren't willing or able to nourish, and ultimately lost control of their creation. Their creation lives on, subsumed in a corporation that neither cares about or wants to remember what made the creation great, just one bland face of three. The Ziegler's both worked in journalism but were unsatisfied with their jobs. They stumbled into running a clothing chain due to a combination of luck, skill (art and writing, as well as an excellent eye for design) and serendipity. The book tells of many highs (finding bargains, excellent sales, extreme customer loyalty) and lows (they seemed to blindly trust people and hire on a whim at times, which leadmdash;in one casemdash;to the loss of an very productive day's receipts due to a dishonest employee, andmdash;in another casemdash;to tens of thousands of dollars of merchandise being lost to another dishonest employee). I was actually surprised how early on in the chain's story they were acquired by The Gap. That acquisition gave them the capital to expand, add more things to the store and even (eventually) design their own clothing rather than sell (mostly) military surplus. But it also eventually doomed Banana Republic as it was. The earliest sign of this was the clash between the lawyer the Ziegler's had for the deal and The Gap's corporate counsel. Then came three family member's from The Gap's founder to work in Banana Republic. Two of the three seemed to fit in, but the third was an ongoing exhaustion to Patricia Ziegler with weekly and daily clashes over materials, clothing lines, new product launches, the way stores looked, etc. Eventually the Ziegler's left Banana Republic in what amounts to a coup by people within The Gap. The Ziegler's spent some time resting, launched a few efforts (some, like The Republic of Teamdash;subject of another co-written bookmdash;succeeded, while others did not) and watched while Banana Republic became what it is today: no different from The Gap or Old Navy, just a variant upon the same bland

theme. Who is blame? The Ziegler's? The Gap? Mel and Patricia had (still have, I'm sure) plenty of talent when it came to writing, design and the like. Not so much when it came to managing the business. Maybe things would have been better if they had found a good partner early on who could manage things while they concentrated on their talents? The Gap initially acquired Banana Republic both for the growth and the culture. Maybe if they had allowed more of that culture to flow up into the larger entity rather than fight the smaller entity they would be more than a bland mall store today? It's really a shame, I think. Banana Republic succeeded because it was quirky. They had excellent merchandise (I believe I still have several of their shirts in my closet) and led the way in bringing us several design trends that we still see (the para-military or adventurer look is still with us) today. The catalogs and stores had a unique identity that set them apart from other Main Street or faceless mall storefronts. All gone, alas. Is it possible to have quality, growth, quirkiness all in one? Is it possible to keep what made a company great over the life of a company? I don't know, but I eagerly await the next Banana Republic. I need some new shirts.

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"This is a wonderful book, a book about joy and guts and art. Mel and Patricia understand that a store is far more than just a place to buy stuff and that a business is far more than a way to make a living."—Seth Godin, author of *Linchpin* "Remarkable tale of creating one of the most cutting-edge fashion businesses in the world... a pleasure to read."—*Publishers Weekly* "The warmly inspiring account of how a journalist and an artist stumbled into business and founded Banana Republic, one of the most successful clothing chains in retail history... Told as a dual-voiced narrative that alternates between Mel's and Patricia's points of view and illustrated throughout with sketches and images featured in the early catalogs, the story offers refreshing insight into the possibilities of achieving success and maintaining personal integrity in a hyperformulaic world. An unabashedly free-spirited celebration of the power of outside-the-box thinking."—*Kirkus* "[Wild Company] uncovers an entertaining and enlightening history that provides a new understanding of what has now become a ubiquitous brandhellip;. Wild Company gives us a reminder regarding the fickle nature of success in the world of entrepreneurs, and it does so with a friendly narrative that's difficult to set asidehellip;. You most certainly don't have to be a patron of the current Banana Republic to enjoy reading Wild Company."—800CEORead.com About the Author Mel Ziegler is a founder of Banana Republic and the Republic of Tea. He lives outside of San Francisco. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. 1 The Racket Begins with a Jacket If you took 1,500 one-dollar bills and laid them end to end, they would stretch all of 750 feet. That gets you only three-quarters of the way down a crosstown block in Manhattan. We had to stretch those dollars into a lifetime—a lifetime free of ever having to work for anyone other than ourselves again. I was a writer in my early thirties, and Patricia, several years younger, an artist. Newly in love, not wanting to be apart for a second, we itched to travel and see the world. That was never going to be possible if we continued to live month to month. We had met at the San Francisco Chronicle, where I worked as a reporter and Patricia as an illustrator and courtroom artist. The Chronicle job served up some stimulating opportunities for a young reporter in the 1970s, and I jumped and cajoled my way into as many as I could. I wrote several stories exposing notorious cult leaders (and questionable gurus such as Werner Erhard, the founder of est) then flourishing in San Francisco's fertile permissiveness, covered the charismatic philosopher Alan Watts's Zen funeral and the Patty Hearst kidnapping by a strange group called the Symbionese Liberation Army, interviewed Andy Warhol and other cultural icons, and wrote the first profile on California's eccentric new young Zen-spouting governor named Jerry Brown. Even so, many of my best ideas were rejected by editors for reasons that had nothing to do with the quality of the idea. Budget, for instance. As the joke went, a notoriously stingy management considered venturing across the Bay Bridge to Oakland to be an out-of-town story subject to layers of approvals. A union shop—every reporter hired was required to join and pay dues—the prevailing mentality in the city room favored seniority over initiative. Plum assignments went to tired old-timers who hacked out stories between swills of Jack Daniels's at Hannors's, the dive in the alley behind the Chronicle Building. If I happened to sneak a good story past the city editor and into the paper one day, I was punished the next day by being handed a pile of obituaries to write. I knew I had to get out of there. It was an eventful time in San Francisco, and working at the Chronicle was exciting. I'd jump on the cable car to work, and many long nights would be spent in lively conversation with our colleagues and politicians at the Washington Square Bar and Grill, the North Beach media hangout. As a sketch artist in 1975 and 1976, I was assigned to cover the trial of Patty Hearst, the kidnapped newspaper heiress turned bank robber, and the trial of Sara Jane Moore, for the attempted assassination of President Gerald Ford. Thrilling as it was to see my work published on page one the morning after I sketched it, there was much downtime between such assignments and a lot of grouching from our colleagues about management, wages, and one another. Of the fifty or sixty people working in the city room, many of them our friends, most had been there considerably longer than we had—some even for twenty or thirty years. Not going to happen to us, we adamantly agreed. I started taking on freelance magazine assignments to fill the lulls, hoping I could soon be able to live on this work alone, trading in the day job for what appeared to be freedom. One day I came home from work and shot Mel a playful I've-got-something-to-tell-you look. He had returned from an

earlier shift and was on the couch reading. Looking up, he asked, "What?" "Guess what?" I could not wait to tell him. "I just quit!" "No!" he replied impishly. "I was going to surprise you—so did I." We were counting on freelance magazine assignments to tide us over until we figured out what to do. First we downsized, moving from our two-floor San Francisco apartment on Russian Hill to a two-bedroom house off Highway 1 in Mill Valley. The cars whizzed by at night, their headlights penetrating our blinds and invading our sleep. Magazine stories paid well but were irregular. Mimicking our moods, Indian summer gave way to a particularly long, cold, and rainy winter. The rough-sawn redwood interior walls of our rented house kept the days dark. We knew we had to find a way out. While many of our journalist colleagues had invested their union salaries in Marin County houses when they were selling for less than six figures, we were barely making the rent. We weren't panicking—we were too young and optimistic for that. We were interested in money only so it could buy us the freedom to paint, write, and travel. We didn't spend much. Our entertainments were hiking, biking, reading, and home-cooked meals with friends. Mel drove an old, beat-up Volkswagen, and I, an old Datsun. Even our cats were frugal, living off the local birds for their meals. We didn't dream about a "someday" with a house, children, and vacations in Hawaii. We viewed the future as one big, mysterious, open-ended possibility, which was what we had wanted, but our new circumstances were beginning to crimp. Freelancing, it became clear, wasn't so free. Mel came home from the library one afternoon with a copy of Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* and tossed it to me. "Maybe this is what we need to do," he said. The book prompted three basic questions: How much money do I want to make? How long do I give myself to make it? How will I make it? We wrote down our answers separately and compared them. We had both scribbled "a million" and "five years." In 1978, \$1 million was a number that any twentysomething middle-class American might have dreamed of making. Five years was the longest period we could envision. That both of us had come up with the same number and time frame validated our answers. Then we each looked at what the other had jotted down as an answer to the "how" question. Again, the same: "start a business." But what business? Several rainy days later, we had yet to find a business idea. The phone rang with a welcome magazine assignment for Mel to explore Australia with several other journalists. "It's probably just a junket," he said, "but it'll pay a couple of months' rent." While Mel went off to the sunny Southern Hemisphere, I braved the next few weeks home alone finishing up my local fashion column and putting the final touches on a magazine assignment about mail-order clothing. Toward the end of the Australian junket, I wandered off one day into the backstreets of Sydney and stumbled on a "disposal store," which is what Australians call their surplus stores. I had been drawn to military surplus clothing since my days as a college student in the 1960s. Like others of my generation, I liked to wear surplus clothing because it was cheap. I also got a tickle from the paradox of being stridently antiwar yet happy to attire myself in military detritus. Until I stepped into the Sydney disposal store that day, most of the surplus I'd seen was originally issued to American soldiers. I was thrilled to find for the first time other surplus from Australia, Britain, France, and elsewhere. One item especially caught my fancy: a British Burma jacket. Made of thick but soft khaki cotton twill, it looked like a safari jacket. It had the tailored feeling of a fine garment. I had to have it, if only to wear it when I landed in San Francisco the following day. I wanted to see Patricia's reaction. Patricia had exquisite taste and a limited budget, a dichotomy she balanced with a talent for spying gems at flea markets and vintage stores. Most people looking at her thought she'd maxed out the credit card on Madison Avenue, when she'd put herself together for pennies. I never thought much about clothing, which led to playful repartee between us. I needled her for being a fashionista, contrasting myself as someone who couldn't care less about what he wore. I claimed to dress in the "first available" clothing I found in my closet. But she was too smart to accept my preposterous claim, countering nimbly that I had selected every piece of clothing in my closet. "Everyone thinks about what they wear," she said, laying me bare, "even people like you who claim they don't." Walking jauntily out of customs at San Francisco International Airport in my new British Burma jacket, topped off with an Australian bush hat I also bought in the disposal store, was meant to be a playful concession to her irrefutable point. A tan man in a khaki bush jacket and an olive green wide-brimmed hat pinned up on one side strode out of the glass doors of customs. I almost didn't recognize Mel. He'd been gone two weeks, the longest he'd been apart since we'd met over two years earlier. I saw him anew. My heart quickened as I watched him, with his usual intensity, searching for my face in the waiting crowd—and then our eyes met. He looked great. Our embrace knocked off his hat, an authentic Australian Army bush hat with the official puggaree band and medallion, he was quick to point out. But it was not his hat that most intrigued me. It was the jacket. How perfect the color, the raised lines of twill, the slightly worn collar and cuffs. This four-pocket jacket screamed "authentic" and "adventure." He caught my stare. "Like it?" he said with a grin. Driving home, Mel regaled me with stories of the Outback and the Great Barrier Reef, but my eyes kept drifting from his face to the jacket. Something was different. Had he acquired this new worldliness, this rather heroic nonchalance, from his adventures Down Under, or was it the jacket? I had been fascinated by the transformative power of clothing since my first job at sixteen in a department store in downtown San Francisco. Visually starved by a childhood of Catholic school uniforms, I ravenously studied the dressing habits of the clientele from the more

sophisticated side of the city. It became clear to me that sartorial habits communicated as much as Professor Henry Higgins discerned from accents. I began to understand how clothes conveyed character, charisma, and class, and with a newly refined eye, I picked out treasures lost in the bins of secondhand stores and flea markets, making slight alterations when necessary, to stretch my small clothing budget. Mel's new jacket said with panache close to everything that I and the friends I admired valued in life: character, adventure, heritage, and independence, especially from the frivolous dictates of fashion. However, it could use some new buttons. Mel trusted me with the improvements. I added suede elbow patches and leather trim on the cuffs and collar, and swapped the metal military buttons for wooden ones. He loved the jacket even more and thanked me profusely. "My favorite jacket of all time," he said, and he wore it almost every day. With Patricia's class refinements, the bush jacket became my proudest possession. Never had I been more at home in a piece of clothing. The jacket had an alchemical effect. I felt roguish and buoyant. Wearing it, I seemed to walk taller, with a more worldly gait. Everywhere I went, people stopped me with a comment or question. "What a great jacket!" "Where did you get that fabulous jacket?" "Excuse me, do you mind if I ask you where you bought your jacket?" On and on and on. The jacket had a message for me, and it didn't take me long to get it: here was the business we'd been looking for. Patricia got the same message on her own. Yes! Between us, we had \$1,500 in our bank accounts. We would use it to start a company that would sell jackets like the British Burma jacket and anything else like it we could find. Therein lay the full and complete business plan of a writer and an artist who had quit their jobs to make it on their own. "What should we name it?" Patricia wondered. That didn't take me a second. "Banana Republic" popped into my head the moment she asked. What better proverbial source of military surplus than politically unstable tropical countries? I fantasized that routine coups produced an abundance of disposed uniforms from toppled regimes. I could not have been happier. The name was not only catchy, but in 1978 it was jarringly irreverent as well. If years in journalism taught me anything, it was to grab someone's attention. It was easier then. The era of fanciful company names spawned by dot-coms had yet to dawn. The name was the easy part. Starting a company wasn't so easy. Neither of us had any experience in business or had taken even a single business course in college. We knew nothing about retail, nothing about mail order, nothing about manufacturing, nothing about surplus, nothing about finance, nothing about management. The only asset we had was our own oblivion. That would keep us blissfully ignorant of the bewildering and arbitrary impediments that would entangle us until we became so embroiled that quitting was no longer a possibility. As any reporter would, I began making phone calls. I learned that when the U.S. government declared military goods surplus, everything went to auction. I tracked down the next nearby auction at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California. There the auctions were divided into lots into which government bureaucrats dumped all kinds of goods in no sensible order. A lot might contain 27 typewriters, used; 1,500 tubes of U.S. Army toothpaste, new; 2 F4F Wildcat propellers, used; four Jeeps' windshields, used; 724 pair of khaki shorts, size 42, used; and so on. If you wanted the shorts, you had to take the toothpaste too. For this reason, most of the bidders tended to be "jobbers" who were essentially junk dealers. They pulled up the truck, loaded the pallets, and pawned off the pieces to whomever and wherever they could. A few more phone calls, and I learned the names of the top six jobbers in the United States. One of them was right over the bridge in Oakland. His name was Zimm, short for Zimmerman. I learned he had a huge warehouse overflowing with military surplus piled floor to ceiling. I sensed that if we walked in cold, Zimm would not know what to make of us. In spite of our company name, I doubted that we could pose as insurgents looking to outfit threadbare comrades. More seriously, we didn't own a surplus store or have any pedigree in the surplus world. We needed a plan. Patricia devised one: we would pose as rich dilettantes. She would wear an expensive-looking dress and her highest heels to convey the impression that she was a trust fund heiress looking for "some interesting pieces" to supplement a boutique she was about to open. I would be the indulgent husband. The visit became a strolling poker match, as the three-hundred-pound Zimm waddled behind us through the dimly lit, cavernous warehouse. It smelled like a mix of wet cement and rotting remainders of sandwiches. Occasionally he drew our attention to "goods" he was willing to part with at "a good price, depending on the quantity." It seemed as though we were wandering in a dark sepia photograph among brown, tan, and gray-green cloth mountains rising up from the cold, damp concrete floor. We could feel Zimm straining to size us up in the long silences. So much stuff was packed into bins and piles that it was difficult to get a good look at what anything was. I asked him about British Burma jackets. He'd seen them but didn't have any. Instead he pointed out piles of used combat boots, bales of new-issue nonwrinkle polyester shirts, woolen U.S. Army mittens, fatigue caps, plastic tarps, rope, mosquito netting. Each time, we nodded and moved on. Now and then Patricia would pick up an item, feel the fabric, examine a detail, ask the price. The first two items she asked about were \$2.50. She didn't react. The next few items were \$2.00. She shrugged her shoulders, barely. We then came upon a huge pile of khaki shirts. "What are these?" she asked. "Spanish Army shirts," Zimm said. "You seem to have a lot of them," Patricia said. That was the signal for me to take a closer look. The shirts had epaulets. The fabric was finely woven. There was an exotic parachute emblem on the sleeves. "You can have them for \$1.75 if you take them all," Zimm said. We haggled and settled at \$1.50 each. The car loaded, we drove home to Mill Valley, half of all our

money in the world invested in five hundred used Spanish paratrooper shirts stuffed in the trunk and piled to the ceiling on the backseat.