



Life is Too Short

Most pen-savvy people will be able to supply the missing words in the title of this article: “Life is too short to carry an Ugly Pen!” The trademarked slogan of Retro 51 perfectly expresses what the company is all about. By creating high quality writing instruments that are also handsome, sometimes quirky, always fun and—oh, yes, affordable—Retro 51 has brought a populist perspective to the pen industry.

“Life is too short not to have fun at work” is clearly the philosophy of Retro 51 founder George Kartsotis. He rides a Vespa to work every day, his home being only minutes away from his facility in Richardson, TX, about ten miles north of downtown Dallas. When *PWI* paid a visit this past December, Kartsotis told us that when the company moved into the space four years ago, it was like a typical warehouse, big and open; now, strategically placed walls mark off various work areas. The walls don’t reach all the way to the high ceiling, so the top ledges offer prime decorating possibilities. We spot various kinds of memorabilia—bowling pins, for example—on the ledges. The place seems both welcoming and hip.

Ross Cameron, who is based in New York and handles all

of the company’s international sales, takes us on a brief tour. Cameron has been working with Kartsotis since 1991, Kartsotis’s first year in business. Cameron explains that the pens are not made here, but they are designed here; after the components come in, they are assembled, inspected and packaged here. Twenty-two employees are based in this facility.

The company has come a long way in its fifteen years. Born in 1951 (get it?), Kartsotis grew up in Albuquerque, NM, graduated from high school in Oklahoma City and briefly attended college at Oklahoma State University before returning to Albuquerque, where he got a job at a car dealership. He started by washing cars and worked through the ranks, but after twenty years, he was ready to move on. He was ready to start his own business.

He’d always liked pens, but he insists that he never thought of his new venture as a pen company. “We’re a gift company. We are selling the accoutrements of life. A pen is not a pen, it’s a vehicle to an end—a way of showing who you are,” he says. Although Retro 51 would soon offer other gift items, pens were the starting point and are

still the most important segment of the business.

Kartsotis decided to locate in the Dallas area, where his two brothers had already established Fossil, a well-known watch and accessory brand. He cashed in his 401K and borrowed money to begin his business, had some pen samples made up and went out to sell. The first retailer he called upon placed a \$1,000 order, and he was in business.

But it took a stroke of good luck and good timing to really put the fledgling company on the map. In January 1991, Kartsotis and his business partner at the time exhibited their products at the New York Gift Show. They were assisting two potential customers; Kartsotis turned his attention to the better heeled of the two, while his partner spoke with a pony-tailed man carrying a backpack. Mr. Backpack turned out to be a representative from the renowned catalog retailer Hammacher Schlemmer, and he was looking for a pen to replace one that had been scheduled to run in the catalog but was not going to be available in time. He liked Retro 51's standard white nickel pen and asked to take a photo sample. Not only was the pen picked up for the catalog, but Hammacher Schlemmer, at its own expense, took out half page ads for the pen in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, and also in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *LA Times*—something Kartsotis could have afforded only in his wildest dreams.

Lucky, yes, but the money didn't begin to roll in

instantly, and bills were waiting to be paid. In February 1991, the rent on Kartsotis's building was due and he didn't know how he was going to pay it. Kartsotis noticed several tractor-trailer rigs pulled up in the parking lot of the strip center in which he was located. They were loaded with Valentine's Day roses, and a plan began to form in Kartsotis's mind. He arranged to buy enough flowers so that if he sold them all at \$29.95 a dozen, he could easily make the rent. Kartsotis and his staff of two printed up fliers, recruited friends to help and hit the streets. In one 24-hour period, they made enough to pay the rent and had fun doing it.

And that's not even the best part of the story, says Kartsotis. On the big day itself, he found that he could purchase the remaining flowers—50 dozen—for a total of \$50. Kartsotis bought them all, and everyone went back out to sell. This time they had even more fun, because the pressure was off. Kartsotis gleefully says that one of his team approached a couple just leaving an expensive restaurant and asked the gentleman if he'd like to buy a dozen roses for the lady. The gentleman scowled and told him to get lost, so the salesman turned to the lady, presented the flowers and told her to keep them as his Valentine's Day gift to her. The chastened gentleman peeled off a \$100 bill.

Suffice it to say that Retro 51 never again had to resort to selling flowers to pay the bills. The company's products



this page—Margarita Puente working in the packaging and shipping area; products displayed at Retro 51 headquarters; the shredded currency used in the Tornado Bill pen; owner George Kartsotis.

opposite—Whimsical table legs; dividing walls in the warehouse-size headquarters; the point of it all.





clockwise from top—The Tornado Bill pen with packaging; prototype of the new Ya-Ling Black Cherry Tornado; the entire Retro 51 staff.



are now found in all 50 states in the US and in Germany, the Benelux region, France, England, Spain, Portugal, the Middle East, South Africa and Australia. It sells leather goods, games, even reading glasses—many of the items created in the 1940s–50s style Kartsotis remembers from childhood. This style represents Kartsotis’s own taste, but luckily, there’s a huge market comprised of nostalgic Baby Boomers whose tastes are very much in tune with his. This generation remembers a time when great care went into the production of goods; accordingly, the company proudly advertises, “We make ’em like they used to.” Kartsotis says firmly, “I’d put my pen up against any other for quality.”

What has made his company so successful? Kartsotis declines to take more than his share of credit. “I rein everybody in and keep them focused, but it’s the people I’ve run into that make it work,” he says. Kartsotis believes in a spirit of collegiality, not hierarchy, and official titles are not

much in evidence at Retro 51. Kartsotis himself has no official title, and neither does Ross Cameron. Kartsotis does most of the design work along with Vickie Giddings and Richard Koehler. Giddings has been with the company for twelve years, starting out as a receptionist, while Koehler began as a graphics intern six years ago while a student at University of North Texas in nearby Denton.

All stress the spirit of teamwork at Retro 51, and a recent example bears witness. Cameron was traveling in England and the Sudoku puzzle craze was in evidence everywhere he went. He immediately thought of creating special Sudoku and crossword designs to apply to Retro’s Tornado model mechanical pencil, which is perfect for puzzle addicts because of its thick lead and generous eraser. Unfortunately, the company would have only a few weeks to get the pencils out to the retailers in time for the all-important holiday season. But the team pulled together and

got the job done. The Sudoku and Crossword pencils became the company's hottest holiday gift items.

The team has on at least one occasion overruled Kartsotis on an important issue. When the design for the Tornado was first presented to him, Kartsotis says he hated it. The rest of the staff outvoted him, so they went ahead with plans to produce the Tornado. It was an immediate hit and is now the standard model for Retro 51 writing instruments, including the newest product, the limited edition (518 pieces) Ya-Ling Black Cherry, a hand lacquered capless rollerball. It takes four months to create each pen, using layers of natural lacquers combined with genuine gold and silver powders. The Ya-Ling retails for a surprising US\$175.

Not to be confused with the Ya-Ling Black Cherry is the acid-etched Cherry Blossom pen, an exclusive Retro 51 creation for Fahrney's. The Washington DC retailer is a sponsor of the National Cherry Blossom Festival, and to honor the event, Retro 51 produced a three-piece set including pencil, convertible rollerball and fountain pen, all based on the Tornado profile, in a pattern depicting the cherry blossoms on the Tidal Basin and the Washington Monument. The set features laser-engraved steel barrels with rose gold-colored metal and retails for \$45 (fountain pen) and \$35 (pencil or convertible rollerball).

The Tornado is also the basis for the Postmaster pen and its cousin Tornado Bill; actual cancelled postage stamps are applied to the body of the Postmaster and genuine shredded dollar bills are applied to the Tornado Bill, and covered with glossy lacquer. These pens, both rollerballs, retail for US\$50.

Retro 51's pen offerings also include the Double-eight collection of eight-sided writing instruments made of cellulose acetate (\$55-85), and the Scriptmaster series of cellulose acetate, turned from solid rods of material (\$55-75).

But those are just the main pen products. Retro 51 offers everything from the classic to the quirky, for all of your moods and for all the people you buy gifts for. Life really is too short. «

Telephone 800.466.1951 or visit the maker online, <www.retro51.com>.

*Reprinted with permission from Pen World, Volume 19, No.6.
Copyright 2006, World Publications, Inc.*

Organize Your Pen World Collection in Style

Protect your back issues of PenWorld in our elegant gold embossed red leatherette cases.

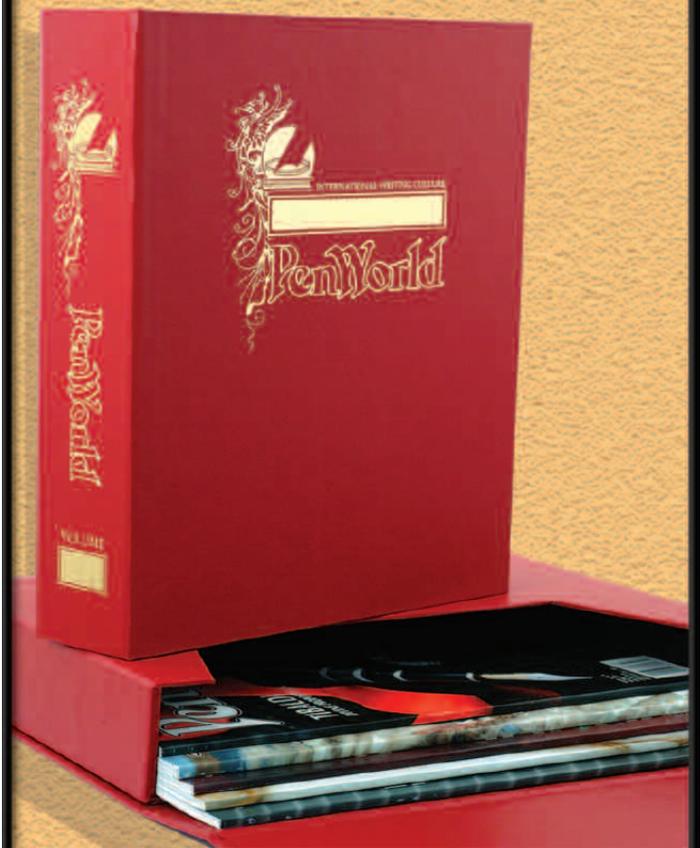
Buy two cases and get the third one FREE!

- One case: \$20, plus \$4 S&H
- Three cases: \$40, plus \$5 S&H
- Six cases: \$80, plus \$8 S&H
- Additional cases: \$12, S&H included
- Back issues: \$5 each with purchase of three or more cases. Some sold-out issues not available.

Special Purchase:

Buy 18 cases to store 19 years of Pen World for only \$215, plus \$20 S&H

Additional shipping charges for outside the U.S.



To order, call 800.774.8555, or
e-mail info@penworld.com

Special offer expires September 30, 2006