

# Hat

## *A tiny store keeps the doors open*

**S**HEILA KIRKPATRICK'S no-nonsense, shoot-from-the-hip approach to life's challenges has served her well—as a cattle rancher, rodeo contestant and hatmaker. She strides into her Montana store with the confidence of a person who knows she is one of the best in her trade.

Her business partner, Jann Potter, balances Kirkpatrick's intensity with a down-home smile and an easy greeting for customers. The well-groomed store terrier completes the Montana Mad Hatters team.

The opposing personalities must work. Together, Kirkpatrick and Potter have tripled their sales of high-quality, 100-percent fur hats in the past five years. They made 400 hats—and cleaned-and-blocked countless others—in 2002. They have not tallied the 2003 numbers yet, but they know they have orders waiting for 45 hats.

"We'll grow at least 30 percent this year," Potter said.

The partners operate out of a 1,000 square-foot historic building in the heart of downtown Twin Bridges, population 800, give or take a new baby or two. The nearest large population center is 80 miles east in Bozeman.

"We're at a crossroads between tourist things. That helps. There's Virginia City (20 miles south), Yellowstone National Park (100 miles farther south) and Idaho (to the west)," Kirkpatrick said.

Montana Mad Hatters also sells four or five hats on the Web every month.

### The line blurs

Mad Hatters hats are not inexpensive—prices range from \$200 for a 10X rabbit fur to \$380 for 50X, 100 percent beaver—but working cowboys and celebrities alike appreciate the quality.

Doug Lasich, a lifelong Twin Bridges rancher, tells this story:

"I'm a man who always wanted a good Western hat. I have three hats in my closet to prove it. One's too big, one's too small and one just

doesn't fit. One day while walking down the street, 'just doesn't fit' blew off and blew down the street like a Frisbee on edge. Jan Potter and Sheila Kirkpatrick caught it and returned it to me. Seeing my dilemma, they invited me into their hat shop to measure my head for a hat. A week later, I walked into their shop. Jan had sewn together my hat, and Sheila sat me down in a tall chair and went to work with her steam machine and her artistic hands. In half an hour, I had a hat that fit perfectly. It even had my name in it on the hat band. These two women made me feel like I was part of their family. The hat, three years later, still looks and feels great. Every time I put it on it feels like I'm going to go see an old friend."

Ranchers are not their only customers. Willard Scott wears one of Kirkpatrick's hats, as does President George Bush.

"Hank Williams has received a lot of awards in a lot of my hats," Kirkpatrick added.

Potter and Kirkpatrick give each customer individual attention.

"We don't assume they want a cowboy hat. They might want a fedora or an 'Indiana Jones' hat. When they come in, we ask them a lot of questions to find out what they want," Kirkpatrick said.



**Kirkpatrick (left) and Potter (right) are best friends, both in and out of the shop. When they are not making hats, they often help each other with ranch jobs.**