

In the early years of the 1900s, President Woodrow Wilson set out to make the world safe for democracy. In 2005, the goal of Charles Owen Co. is to make horseback riding safe for the world.

The United Kingdom-based company produces high-quality helmets and body protectors. Although the products have only been available generally in the United States since 1999, the company has made huge inroads into the English trade market.

"When we first started, we had no American standards on our helmets, but even without them, a number of stores looked at the quality and said, 'We can sell this product,'" said Roy Burek, head of the company and grandson of its founder, Charles Owen.

Since then, not only have Charles Owen helmets met all applicable safety standards, but the company has helped write many of the standards.

The company graduated from making pith helmets in 1911 to being a leader in motorcycle helmets and eventually to equestrian helmets.

Burek remembers as a young teen fitting motorcycle helmets for riders twice his age. He learned another lesson during his formative years: Owning your own business is hard work.

Burek said he really had no intention of following in his father and grandfather's footsteps and struck out to get a chemistry degree at Oxford. He later took a position in management with Proctor & Gamble.

"I wanted to find my own way in the world," Burek said, "but I found that the further you went up the scale with a company, the less influence you had on your job."

In the early '80s, Burek's father was poised to sell the company but changed his mind when Roy decided to join the company.

While Burek has undoubtedly put his own stamp on the company, he's never strayed too far from the original precepts—making the highest-quality product and selling the idea of safe riding along with it.

"Yes, we are a helmet company, but beyond that, we've always seen ourselves as a resource to the industry and our customers. If anyone wants to know anything, they should be able to pick up the phone and get an answer.

"We give them a fair and independent view, not a sales pitch," Burek added.

Burek devotes about equal amounts of time to ensuring that his company runs efficiently and spreading the word about helmets and safety. He made several appearances in the United States earlier this year, various governing boards for a variety of riding disciplines were considering changes in helmet rules.

Charles Owen representatives also conducted fitting seminars for retailers attending the Stanley KOP Market in January, most of which played to stand-in-room-only crowds.

Although the company's educational efforts aren't a profit center, as such, the efforts do fall to the bottom line, Burek contends.

# Charles Owen Co.

## More Than A Product: It's A Mission

By Paul Wahl, Editor

### Charles Owen at A Glance

- > Established in 1911
- > First helmets were pith helmets for the British Army
- > Relocated from London to Wrexham in North Wales in 1992
- > Employs 80 workers.
- > Entered the United States market in 1999

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