FINDING TRUE NORTH IN RIVERTON, WYOMING

By

Ross Mason

At five-feet eight and 120-pounds, Lauren Heerschap tends to disappear into the background of the Wyoming warehouse that holds her future. The thin smile belies intensity until she speaks. The voice is one of quiet authority, punctuated with an easy laugh that suggests she is comfortable and unafraid, excited to explain what she does.

The warehouse, 38,000 square feet of mostly cavernous concrete and steel, is the Riverton, Wyoming headquarters for Brunton International, a manufacturer of high-end compasses and pocket transits popular with geologists, soldiers, and hikers worldwide. Heerschap, and husband David, own the company and have set their sights on making sure Brunton is a name that remains on the lips (and preferably in the pocket) of anyone who is looking for true north, needs to find the range for a mortar shell, or wants to calculate the strike and dip of a massive rock formation.

“We have three big markets,” says Lauren. “Outdoor recreation, geology, and military.”

Her husband, sitting next to her at a table in an unassuming break room a few feet away from the factory floor, nods in agreement. It is small talk, but you can tell she wants to get to the meat of the conversation.

“Geology is the biggest market,” David adds, which fits well with Lauren who is also a geologist, a profession dominated by men (21% of geologists are women, according to online recruiter Zippia). She is also the Brunton CEO. She owns 51 percent of the company — David, the chief operating officer, 49%. It is a family affair, financed with the mortgage of their home, plus a loan from her parents in New Mexico. They bought the overlooked company from Fenix Outdoor, a massive Swedish conglomerate, in a 2021 arrangement that had to remain a secret for a year of intrigue. More on that later.

It takes a good compass to track the path of Heerschap’s unlikely rise to CEO. Raised in New Mexico, she went to school at Wheaton College in Illinois, a small liberal arts Christian school where she planned to work her way to medical school or perhaps go into the seminary — until she took a geology class.

“We did our (geology) field camp in the Black Hills. That’s where I first used a Brunton. I was hooked. Never looked back.”

It may have been something in the blood. She grew up in Los Alamos, a self-described scout sister. Her dad and brother were big into Boy Scouts. She tagged along learning outdoor skills and by the age of 16, had developed a serious rock-climbing habit. There are a lot of rocks in Los Alamos, a geological heaven of sorts for those who love the outdoors. After graduating from Wheaton, she attended grad school at the University of Colorado in Boulder, studying mountain building and earthquake geology in Taiwan. Her first job out of school was with the Colorado Geological Survey. She and David met in grad school and married before they moved to Durango where she taught at Ft. Lewis College.

Their shared passion for climbing and all things outdoors eventually led them to Riverton and the purchase of Brunton. They had always used Brunton compasses and transits because of the company’s reputation for quality.

Brunton has been around in multiple iterations since 1894 when a Canadian mining engineer named D.W. Brunton designed and built a pocket-sized transit to ease the burden of the heavy tripods and assorted equipment surveyors and engineers need to measure geologic formations. Brunton licensed his equipment patents with Ainsworth & Sons of Denver where they were manufactured until 1972 when a group of Wyoming businessmen bought the assets and moved them to Riverton. It has remained in the small central Wyoming community since, although some manufacturing was located in China after a Swedish firm, Silva Production AB, took its turn at the reins in 1996. Two more Nordic companies followed Silva’s ownership, each with its own ideas of product line and marketing priorities. Brunton once again settled into its new owners, but you get the feeling from current employees that it just wasn’t the same under foreign management. Rudderless may be a bit strong, but the sense of belonging and pride innate to local companies just wasn’t there during those years of overseas control. The Brunton brand still said Wyoming, but the name had also been slapped on variety of camping-related gear that had little to do with the linchpin of the company — compasses and transits.

“We wanted to take the company back to its roots, and we’re doing just that,” says Heerschap. “We really value that we do everything under one roof. As of 2024, 100 percent of our compasses are made here (Riverton). We are phasing out the two Chinese made models. They will be gone by the end of this 2025.”

There are a few parts that are made elsewhere, notably the aluminum bodies of the compasses and transits. They are milled in Taiwan, but according to David Heerschap, Brunton is close to finding a Wyoming company that can meet the quality and cost requirements.

Weaving through the workstations you see a deceptively large amount of manual labor in the manufacturing process. Robots can do a lot, but they are costly and there is something to be said for the personal touch on a fine piece of equipment. There are 60-to-70 parts that go into the transits, and the steps involved require exacting precision.

There are about 30-employees, but they’re looking for more. Most predate the ownership change. Wendy, a seven-year veteran and the quality control guru, is scurrying about but stops to tell me why she likes Brunton.

“I work here because I get to influence the product. Every day is different. Every day is a challenge.”

The highest end of the company’s product line is the Axis Transit, an $800 engineering marvel and brainchild of Lauren who is not an engineer. Neither is David but combine a brilliant idea with tenacity and amazing things can happen. They were still living in Durango. He was teaching at a high school, while she was attempting to show geology students at Fort Lewis College the basics of using a pocket transit. They used the traditional Brunton in class, but she was frustrated trying to explain how it worked and the process of getting one measurement, then another, and another. It wasn’t intuitive.

“I remember the moment,” she says, shaking her head, a small smile creasing her lips. “I was wishing the Brunton could twist like this, so we could make the measurement better.”

She is holding the Axis model she invented in her hands and twisting it to illustrate.

“We could do this and this,” she adds, fluidly turning the transit into two more positions. I remember thinking this is a good idea. I filed it away and at winter break I told Dave (her husband) it would be really fun to try to make this.”

It was an idea that wouldn’t leave her alone. Over the course of the two-week break David bought a mill and learned how to shape aluminum, even how to melt it.

“We did this in the driveway and garage of our home,” says David with a laugh.

“And when we ran out of aluminum, we melted down the old carabiners we used in climbing,” Lauren adds.

They made three initial prototypes. She shows me two of them, including the first model made of wood.

“It worked,” says Lauren. “It was what I envisioned and knew it was unique.”

The next step was protecting the idea.

“We learned how to patent something, which was more complicated than either of us thought. We had to cash in some of our meager teacher retirements funds to get it to work. It was not cheap or easy, but it worked.”

They took it to field camp at the college and the students took to it right away, according to Lauren. Then they took it to Brunton, headquartered in Boulder at that time and owned by Fenix, a Swedish conglomerate.

“The new president of the company said you have just walked in the door with a new idea. The company was expanding to portables. They quickly said yes, but it took a year to figure out what yes meant.”

It turned out to be a licensing agreement. The Heerschaps kept the patent and licensed Brunton to manufacture the product named Axis Transit. They took a sabbatical and moved to Lander, Wyoming because they are avid climbers, and the community is only a 30-minute drive to the manufacturing warehouse in Riverton. David became the company’s engineer, though he had no formal training, and the existing engineer was nearing retirement. Lauren was teaching part time and spent time doing unpaid support work and promotion for Brunton and the new Axis Transit.

“I was annoyed. Felt like I had been left out.”

She started bothering the Swedish CEO, telling him she wanted to work. Then out of the blue, the CEO asked David in a phone call if the Heerschaps wanted to buy Brunton. That was in January of 2021.

“I wasn’t invited to the conversation (because she was not employed by the company), so I sat under the stairwell of our home and listened in. I was getting more and more irritated. We were both frustrated. Brunton (and Axis) wasn’t getting any real attention or marketing.”

As she reflects on the deal, Heerschap is more understanding and appreciative.

“Fenix is a big company with a lot of brands and subsidiaries to run, but we thought Brunton needed its own home and identity. They (Fenix) gave us an opportunity that neither of us had thought possible.”

In the end, the Heerschaps said yes to the (Fenix) deal.

“David and I positioned ourselves to become the owners. It was a natural fit because of our history with Brunton.”

They mortgaged their home, Lauren’s parents invested, and Fenix gave them a generous buyers finance deal. Only a handful of people were aware of the sale. And there was a hitch — the transaction had to remain confidential until the deal was completed in mid-November 2021. During that time, Lauren was hired on as sales manager for the geology/professional line. But no one in the Riverton facility knew about the sale. Nor did anyone at corporate in Boulder.

“My immediate boss, the sales and marketing director didn’t even know about it,” Lauren laughs. “It was awkward. I was almost fired several times because I was going to all these secret meetings. David and I assumed roles neither of us went to school for.”

They learned fast.

Brunton has belonged to the Heerschaps for three years. The company is doing well and is working with the University of Wyoming on a new product, details of which remain secret. The product had advanced to a second stage of testing, but the Heerschaps are mum on details.

“It’s been in the works for a long time,” says Lauren suggesting it could be a big deal.

Some of the product line has gone away, but virtually all that remains is manufactured in Riverton. Scientific equipment is 60-70 percent of the company’s revenue, mostly transits and high-end compasses. Most of the company’s sales are in the US, but 30-40 percent is international. As much as 20 percent of revenue is from the military for compasses that help soldiers fine-tune artillery targets, among other uses. Brunton has submitted a bid for another military contract for a thumb held lensatic compass. Lensatic compasses have a sighting aid to help take line of sight measurements off features in the landscape. It is the primary navigational tool for the military.

“If (Brunton) wins the bid, there is the potential to double or triple our annual revenue,” says Lauren.

Production of the lensatic compass could be from 50-100-thousand per year. The company already supplies the M-2, a basic military transit that is used for aiming mortars and precise artillery fire, but it numbers only three-to-four thousand annually.

The profitability is in higher end instruments such as the Axis, but the item that sells the most in quantity is the recreational compass line. You would be hard pressed to find an avid hiker who hasn’t used a Brunton compass. Some things just don’t change.

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