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The “Grenoble phenomenon” through the prism of an innovative company

The Jamet company (1929 – 1987)

Régis Boulat

- 1 The development of the Jamet company has illustrated, for nearly fifty years, the “Grenoble phenomenon” intimately mixing a system of activities and local values, myth and reality (Frémont 1987; Frappat, 1979). The young ski champion Andre Jamet opened his first store of sporting goods in 1929 in the context of development of tourism practices in Summer or Winter, and media coverage of sporting appearances, of synthetic fibers restarting the local textile sector (Morsel and Parent, 1991, p. 46) but it was during the “Trente glorieuses” characterized by industrialization and mass tourism with the advent of the mobility of leisure as a social norm and the development of new synthetic fibers that the company gradually became the European leader of recreational equipment (tents, camping equipment) and folding caravans. At the crossroads of the territorial logic of industry, of innovation and of history of tourism in the Alps, this portrait of a manufacturer of sports equipment and leisure emphasizes the emergence of new practices, the transformation of land uses and the development of new markets illustrating the appearance of a new industrial sector in the Alps (Dalmasso, 2007; Périères, 1963).

The expertise of a champion to serve pioneers consumers (1929-1945)

How to exploit the celebrity of a sportsman

- 2 Born in 1906 in a dauphinoise family, (his father, Jean Jamet used to be an employee in a glove factory) André Jamet worked at the age of 16 in a sawmill where he quickly became a foreman while conducting a parallel career of skier and mountaineer.

Champion of the Dauphiné from 1930 to 1935 in combined slalom, skiing, downhill and jump, he was also a member of the French national team between 1930 and 1932 along future champions such as Émile Allais. Although his parents initially intended him to embark to a mechanical vocation (he gets a CAP adjuster), his passion for the mountain and winter sports leads, with a little money, to the creation of a store of mountain sports goods (mountaineering, skiing, camping equipment), place Victor Hugo in Grenoble in 1929. At the edge of bankruptcy two years later he had the idea to develop his activity through a catalog sent to regular customers and addresses provided by the latter.

- 3 The context of the early thirties is doubly auspicious. On the one hand, camping, of English origin, is once again booming in the alpine landscapes freshly “invented” (Rauch, 2001): the French Touring Club makes cards available to its members, organizes outings in order to compare the quality of the material while conveying representations and values in the vein of various avenues explored since the beginning of the century. Meanwhile, the material, in a process of specialization (shape of the tent, the bedding, composition of cookware, choice of tools and clothing) gradually differs from the military hardware and the equipment of alpinists (Bertho Lavenir, 1999 and 2001). On the other hand, winter sports gradually impose themselves as a “touristic innovation” – however the French Federation of skis accounted 7,000 members in 1930 only – requiring materials (wooden skis, poles) to be produced locally, in particular by Rossignol, born in Voiron in 1907 (Terret and Arnaud, 1996; Larique, 2006, Rossignol, 2008).
- 4 Then, while a new sport tendency influenced by the English is developing, in which elegance prevails (Jamain, Samson, 2008), the equipment market is structured around stores like La Hutte founded in 1922 (Beguin, 1993), the dissemination of his catalog, one of the first in France, allows Jamet to develop his reputation while providing a doubling of his turnover and keeping the specter of bankruptcy away. Renamed Alpes Sports, the company manufactured few technical products such as “après-ski” in 1932 in cooperation with Le Trappeur and “storm jacket” with a cap in 1934. Naturally, André Jamet used his expertise and his reputation – he became French jump champion in 1934-1935 – in his commercial presentation, illustrating the trend of manufacturers and retailers to transform their catalogs in “autobiographical breviaries” (Sirost, 2001, p. 616):

“As a fervent mountaineer myself, I know all the needs of mountaineers and I have tried and gave myself the task to satisfy them. To get exactly what you want, I founded a clothing factory. It is under the direction of an athlete that are designed, cut and run, in tissues that are subjected to severe selection, all the necessary clothing that makes mountain climbing more convenient and more enjoyable. All other sporting goods in this catalog have been tested and selected carefully and were selected the ones that offer the greatest guarantee of security”¹.

Equipping both high-level athletes and first tourists

- 5 In 1935-1936, while Jamet is one of the first to manufacture steel pole tents, a couple of famous expeditions contributed to enhance the reputation of his company. He first provided tents for the Coche mission in Hoggar which achieved the first ascent of Mount El Djenoun and discovered rupestrian sites in 1935. But it’s mostly the first French expedition in the Himalaya which highlighted the Jamet production (Raspaud,

2003, p. 53-57). Indeed, in 1936, the French mountaineers who took part to the “race of the 8,000” in order to compete with England, Germany or Italy needed small size altitude tents with a maximum quality (habitability, strength, resistance to cold, wind and snow, light weight, and easy to put up). Innovative compared to the models developed by the English climbers during their assaults of the European summits in the nineteenth century (Lejeune, 1998; Sirost, 2002, p. 50-51), Jamet proposed a model of isothermal and resisting tent previously restricted to a few friends. Alpes Sports had to make no less than 54 tents whereas it was not its primary vocation (Sirost, 2001, p. 617). The structure consists of two tents, one into the other, the inner being suspended to the outer one, that can be removed to allow easier drying and air insulation. The groundsheet is especially sewn in the shape of a bath to allow camping in the snow. Equipped with Jamet tents, the expedition led by Henry Segogne is thwarted by a storm at 7,100 metres due to the early arrival of the monsoon.

- 6 If, the collective memory remembers a “flood of tents” and an appropriation of beaches and trains for the first beneficiaries of the Front Populaire paid holidays, the reality is much more complex because you have to learn how to travel. Since 1937, an increasing number of campers-consumers boosted the demand in equipment and sports goods and while the textile factory founded in 1935 by the Trigano family sold his first canvas tents and the Lafuma backpack became a best-seller (Joffard, 2007, p. 17-22), Alpes Sport turned to leisure tents, camping goods and scout equipments.
- 7 Thus, in 1939, whereas the number of licensed campers was close to 30,000, the Jamet factory produced more than 1,000 tents per year but the activity also depended on mail orders of sports goods or equipment and the demand was stimulated by the media coverage of successful French champions such as Émile Allais. Mobilized in the Alpine infantry during World War II, a period marked by a new fruitful meeting between soldiers and sport goods manufacturers, mountain and “Révolution nationale” (Travers, 2001), André Jamet resumed his activity in 1946. In the early fifties, thirty Italian women (cutters, stitchers,...) worked in the manufacture of tents and clothing. Jamet was again the official supplier of many expeditions including a new one to the Himalaya in 1950 and Paul-Émile Victor on his way to the North Cape... However, feeling a huge potential, Jamet registered his trademark, specialized in camping framed-tents and moved from the small-scale production by craftsmen to the industrial level.

André Jamet, European leader of the folding caravan during the « Trente glorieuses »

Innovate to take advantage of camping mutations

- 8 The context of the “Trente Glorieuses” mixing economic growth, working-time reduction, increased mobility through individual cars promoted massification – democratization of the access to vacations (7 million of tourists in 1951, more than 26 million in 1975), industrialization of tourism and finally the formation of an affluent society inextricably connected to the development of the town and country planning policy (Bouneau, 2007, p. 93-108). Gradually, tourism and outdoor activities spread out: while the first exhibition of sports and camping goods held in Paris in 1950, camping

asserted itself as a means of cheap accommodation, less expensive and less restrictive than the hotel.

- 9 In the Grenoble area, the spillover effects for sport-goods manufacturers and developers of “clubs de vacances” (Trigano, 1998; Réau, 2007, p. 66-87 and 2010) gave birth to a specialized industrial network : while the company founded by René Ramillon in 1933 producing metal mechanisms for sports and camping (sticks, tent structures) offered a metal folding bed inspired by the suspension of the Citroën 2 CV before being turned into the famous Moncler “doudoune”, Jamet took advantage of the obsolescence of the Canadian tent (uncomfortable for families, for cooking and for entertainment on rainy days) by offering innovative large square tents, “small houses” that could fit in a car trunk and innovative folding caravans which had nothing to do with older models. Coming back from a trip to the United States where he visited factories (“I do not understand how I didn’t run away when I saw all the things my factory lacked!”), the 45 year old André Jamet (Vigneron, 1975) reoriented himself from the status of producer-retailer of small equipment sold to consumers to the status of manufacturer of leisure goods (especially sleeping bags), large modern tents and folding caravans. In a few years the production increased ten times to reach 50,000 tents and sleeping bags per year, a new production plant of 3,000 m² on Sidi Brahim street was opened in Grenoble in 1958, and in 1959-1960, the company, employing 200 workers, achieved a turnover of nearly 2 billion Francs. In 1960, the export percentage was “only” 25%, but the prospects seemed huge in countries of Northern Europe, on the North American continent and even in Asia. In 1964, 250 sewing machines annually spent 4 000 km of fabrics in order to manufacture 80,000 tents (45,000 frames), 90 000 sleeping bags while the clothing sector was growing.
- 10 In the sixties, it seemed like all the industrial sectors of sport goods and equipment saw a brighter future (until 1964, the number of tents manufactured and of campers enrolled in clubs double every 4 years) and the democratization of the caravan then opened new perspectives (1972, the first fifth of French vacationists intended to sleep in a tent but, or when they could, in a caravan). All the local manufacturers of sport goods and outdoor equipments began their production campaigns earlier in order to be more reactive to the increasing demand and the orders arriving during the coldest and busiest months. However, some analysts anticipated both the saturation of the French market and an increased competition meaning lower margins: “We will not see in the future the large profits we used to have in the past”².
- 11 When asked about his success, André Jamet, instead of insisting on the favorable context, on the hire of research technicians, on the use of new materials to reduce costs or the use of a cheap Italian workforce, emphasized his own qualities of a persevering and “do-it-yourself” mountaineer and his constant deepening of technical and sales issues. Considering that camping will continue to grow both in France and abroad, perhaps less prosperous, however, that during the last ten years, considering also that this practice required a regular renewal of equipment, Jamet invested in a new plant, the one in Grenoble being at the limit of its possibilities. The company moved to Pontcharra in 1965. The plant consisted on two buildings, one of 3,000 m², dedicated to the manufacture of sleeping bags with the most modern methods and machines (carding and multi-needles machines). The goal was then to reach 140,000 bags. This plant also manufactured Canadian tents... In short, more than 18,000 m², where 350 workers worked and, ultimately, a group whose activities gradually expanded around

two divisions: the camping division (Canadian tents, frame tents, folding caravans, sleeping bags) and a sports division (mountain clothings, blankets, tents, hiking and mountain...).

- 12 Progressively, André Jamet asserted himself as a manufacturer of finished products mainly textiles (made from cotton or nylon) cut and made in small batches in the Pontcharra workshops. In order to make the structure of the folding caravans and camping tents, the Plant had a workshop specialized in metallurgy, making flow tubes, manufacture of chassis, welding, surface treatment of metal components... all in small series. Assembling and inner installations of camping and caravaning equipments were also made in Pontcharra. Jamet marketed his production directly to supermarkets and retailers, or through a group of retailers, Jam'co, created in the mid-60s, gathering together 200 stores in France and representing, at the highest moment of the period, more than 25% of the turnover of the company. The aim was to find optimum conditions of sliding scales, to provide a technical assistance to the distribution network by promotional actions as well as advertising bundles, advice for members on how to settle and to run their business on a regional or a national basis. As for the store of the Place Victor Hugo, the starting point of the saga, it became too small and was transferred boulevard Agutte-Sembat. On 600 m², Jamet offered sports goods (clothing and equipments), a credit card without annual fees, insurances for the skis, sale-testing of metallic skis, second-hand equipments, a repairing workshop, a retouching cloth workshop and a permanent exhibition of camping equipment and folding caravans...
- 13 In 1975, considering his competitors, and considering the mutations of the French touristic practices (cheaper air-plane tickets made sunny shores and resorts available to a growing number of consumers) as well as the first oil shock which didn't look promising for anybody, André Jamet skillfully decided to sell his company which was then one of the most important in Europe in the sector (nearly 600 employees, 80 million Francs of turnover with a third due to exports and a net profit of 2,2 millions). In an interview, "this closed-face mountaineer cheering up when he had to" appeared to be pessimistic about the future considering his Asian competitors. Whereas Alain Jamet, one of his two sons stayed for a few month as the Industrial director of the company purchased by SEB in 1975, Jamet wanted to continue the commercial exploitation of his reputation, and of its brand, in this new context characterized by the rise of the "club de vacances", developing the "André Jamet Clubs"³.

The SEB period

- 14 For SEB, which began a phase of external growth in the late sixties with the purchase of Tefal (1968) and Calor (1972) (Joly, 2010, p. 425-427), the takeover of the firm through its subsidiary TEFAL confirmed the intention of the group to diversify itself into outdoor leisure activities, diversification initiated by the takeover in 1973 of PLASTOREX (outdoor dishes) and the launch of a range of barbecues by Tefal. But, the perspective for the sector started degrading due to the economic crisis that brought down the market of framed-tents (going from 130,000 to 90,000 pieces from 1976 to 1980), to the development of a national (Raclet and Trigano) or international competition (nonexistent until 1980, European Eastern countries were covering 30% of the market at 20% lower prices). In this context, hoping that its new automatic caravan, the JAMETIC (automatically opened in 30 seconds) will help to maintain a proper level of employment, SEB endowed Jamet with a sophisticated structure (25 executive

managers) and carries out heavy investments in a sector that, from the general opinion, was rather representative of "well organized craftsmen". In the mountain goods sector where Jamet was also well established, supplying once again twenty major expeditions in the late seventies and hiring Jean Affanasief, the management team also relied on a new tent model, stakeless, which opens in three seconds and, finally, on its distribution network Jam'co. For the new CEO, Paul Rivier, Jamet met and satisfied the needs of men in nature using innovation and the brand's reputation⁴.

- 15 Despite his skills, Jamet underwent important financial losses (50 million francs from 1976 to 1980, financial expenses exceeding 7% of the turnover) and SEB had to adopt several restructuring plans: in 1978, rather than initiating a procedure of layoffs that would have most likely been granted, the Company used an incentive voluntary departure program for 80 of its employees. In September 1980 the dismissal of 138 of the 279 employees of the Sidi Brahim plant and the transfer to the Pontcharra plant of the remaining employees led to a social conflict characterized by a modest mobilization of the inhabitants of Grenoble⁵. In 1981, SEB bought all the shares held by its subsidiary Tefal, set up an adequate industrial structure (325 employees for a turnover of 100 million, 30% due to the export sector and a tent sector representing more than 40% of the total activity) and appointed a new CEO, Michel Piraud, who made a good part of his career in the Rossignol company⁶. If Jamet shared almost equally with Trigano and Raclet the 75% of the French tent market, the company remained the undisputed European leader in folding caravans with 20-25% of the market and is the only one to have diversified its primary activities (camping and caravans) to winter outdoor activities through technical clothings, quilts or mountaineering tents.
- 16 Finally, in 1982, SEB sold Jamet to the Lemaire family (Limited Liability Company Laplaud Limoges specializing in bedding, sleeping bags and mountain clothings) but the attitude of the banks changed: Jamet was no longer sustained by the giant SEB but by a Limited Liability Company with a limited financial credit. If the company still had attractive features (mainly its reputation due to its participation to several prestigious expeditions, its efficient export network and its European leadership in the field of folding caravans) and opportunities (supply options, solid trading network based on 200 retailers, a competitive segment on folding caravans, the emergence of a new caravan market, niche sector of technical tents derived from the high mountain practices), Jamet was however handicapped by the loss of too many sales at loss, by serious loss of market shares in the tent field, by a declining quality and productivity, by delays in innovation, by the hostility of the staff, by its heavy structures, by its huge needs in irrevocable credit and campaign credits...) in a context of significant decline of purchasing power.
- 17 The bankruptcy proceedings in March 1983 led to the assignment, as a concession, to the Trigano group Jamet brand for all products concerning camping. While the Jamet company was awarded the Janus Gold Industry in March 1987 by the French Institute of Industrial Design for its JAMETA – a prototype polyester camper, the company was not immune to second bankruptcy. It was taken by the temporary working group chaired by Marc Braillon (Braillon, 1994), RMO, close to Alain Carignon, which was finally given up to the Trigano Group in December 1990.
- 18 From the twenties to the eighties, the example of the Jamet company illustrated the development in the Grenoble area of a new industry devoted to sports and leisure. The territorial aspect is important because it is his awareness of sports and that of a

practitioner of the mountain that allowed Jamet to start a business and ensure its development during the thirties. If, after the Second World War, as a businessman and an advised engineer he knew how to capitalize on the growth of this sector as well as its mutations, he knew how to preserve the local nature of his company and his business does not embark into an external growing movement even though it was essential to streamline the sector. The problem of the transfer of the business in a context of a deteriorated market also appears to be another pitfall that ultimately led its sale to SEB which wanted to implement management practices, with all the characteristics of a big industry to the activities of a well organized craft business.

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NOTES

1. ADI, 1J1350, extrait du catalogue de l'été 1934.
2. ADI, 4232W110, rapport de la Banque de France sur l'activité industrielle, novembre 1961.
3. Archives Seb, dossier Jamet, lettre de C. Digeon à André Bouju, 15 juillet 1976.
4. ADI 7757W54, 14 mars 1979.
5. ADI 7757 W54, Note des Renseignements Généraux, 9 juillet 1980.
6. *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, 14 mai 1981.

RÉSUMÉS

This portrait of the Jamet company, manufacture of sports equipment and leisure founded in Grenoble in 1929 by the young ski champion Andre Jamet emphasizes the emergence of new sport practices, the transformation of land uses and the development of new markets illustrating the appearance of a new industrial sector in the Alps.

AUTEUR

RÉGIS BOULAT

Docteur en histoire, ANR TIMSA.