

Time and Again – K2

The Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum has an exceptional exhibit of K2 materials on display until August 2. It is well worth your time to visit the Museum and connect with the important role K2 has played in Vashon's history.

K2 not only represents an important part of the development of business and industry on Vashon, but also represents Vashon's role as a hinterland to the larger Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area, Vashon's particular susceptibility to the boom and bust economic cycles that characterize the Pacific Northwest Region, and Vashon's place in the global economy of the 21st Century.

During World War II, Otto Kirschner began making splints for doctors in Texas and started the Kirschner Manufacturing Co. in San Antonio, Texas. Moving to Vashon after the War, Otto and his two sons Don and Bill began to experiment with reinforced plastics, to manufacture splints and animal cages designed for use in veterinary clinics. In 1956, as the business outgrew the garage at Otto's home, the Kirschners purchased the old Winter's Forest building on Vashon Highway as a manufacturing plant. This building became the base from which the eventual K2 complex would grow over the next half century.



The photograph of the Kirschner Manufacturing Co. Building (VMIHA) from the 1950s shows the building with newly planted landscaping, Vashon Highway without wide paved shoulders, and mailboxes at the corner of the unpaved side road next to the building.



The 2009 photograph (Terry Donnelly) shows the building with the 1950s planting at full maturity, additional ornamental plantings nearly obscuring the building from view, the side road paved, and the mailboxes replaced with a pedestrian crossing sign to protect K2 employees crossing the highway.



Bill Kirschner became known as a fiberglass pioneer, and was involved with a program that brought fiberglass to the nose cone of the MOMARC Missile. As an avid skier and inveterate tinkerer, he decided to apply new fiberglass techniques to try and build a better ski. In 1961, he borrowed a pair of Head metal skis and used them as a model to build his first pair. Using a “wet wrap” technique, which he went on to patent, Bill invented a fiberglass ski that would revolutionize the ski industry. (When asked why skis, Bill would reply that he had run out of things to “fiddle” with at Kirschner Manufacturing, having already tried to develop a lettuce wrapping machine and fiberglass boats, neither of which was fruitful. He thought a fiberglass ski could be practical and economical.)

Unfamiliar with the ski industry, he talked with the owners of a Seattle based ski distribution firm, Anderson and Thompson Ski Company. They encouraged him to continue development. Following two years of fine tuning and testing the skis, production began in 1964. The Kirschner family and their friends all worked side by side during the first years of the enterprise. Bill's early training with an English tool and die maker paid off, as the machinery, molds and presses for ski manufacturing were also made right at the ski factory. While not the first to invent a fiberglass ski, Bill was the first to develop a fiberglass ski that could be commercially produced. And thus, the K2 Corporation was born.



The photograph of Bill Kirschner sitting at his desk in the 1960s (K2 Corporation) shows him at the peak of his management of K2, named after the mountain and the two Kirschner brothers.



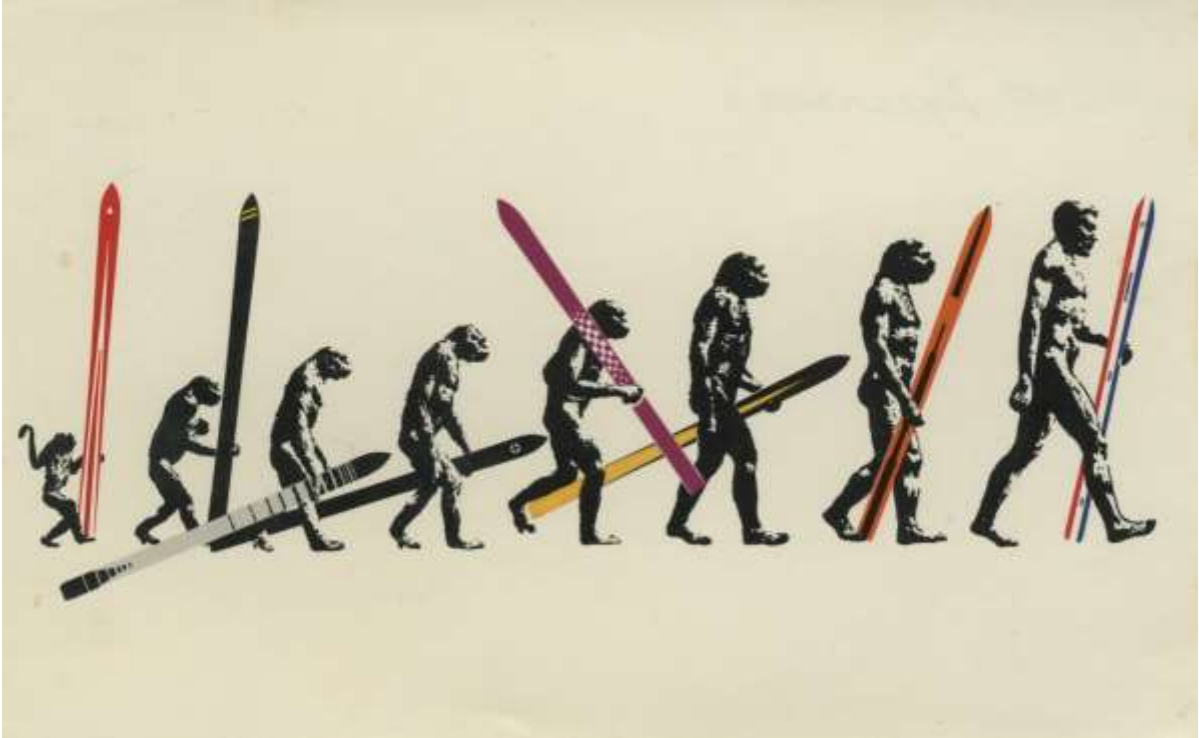
The 2005 photograph (Skiing Heritage) was taken when Bill was late in life but displays the vibrancy, humor, and good looks that characterized his life. We should all be so lucky!

The initial emphasis was on the recreational market, with a model called "Holiday". K2's phenomenal growth was spurred by the hiring of Chuck Ferries, former coach of the U.S. Women's Ski team and member of the USA Olympic Ski team in 1960 and 1964, as they began to develop a line of racing skis. Ferries sent Red White and Blue K2 prototypes to Marilyn Cochran, who went on to win the 1969 World Cup... the first World Cup ever won on American skis. Phil and Steve Mahre won 5 Olympic Medals and 36 World Cup victories skiing exclusively on K2's. Pro skiers including Spider Sabich, Wayne Wong, Jean Claude Killy, and Glen Plake, among others, skied on K2's and contributed to K2's dominant presence in the ski industry.

This rapid growth demanded new production facilities, and in the late 1960s and early 1970s K2 built a production plant and then added to it with a \$3 million expansion. Because it was difficult to finance such a fast growing company, in 1969 Kirschner sold K2 as a wholly owned subsidiary to Cummings Diesel, but stayed on as K2's Chairman. This enabled huge expansion in K2's manufacturing.



The photograph of the K2 plant expansion of the early 1970s (K2 Corporation) shows the north production building and the administration offices during preparation of the site for the construction of the larger south production building. The 2009 photograph of the facility (Terry Donnelly) show the size of the 1970s addition with the roofline of the administrative offices recognizable in the background surrounded by mature landscaping.



In 1976, Sitca Corporation, a Northwest investment group, bought K2 and owned the company until 1982, when the management team of K2 purchased all the shares of Sitca. This group managed the company until Anthony Industries, a diversified sports equipment corporation, purchased K2 as the “crown jewel” of its nine company empire. In 2007, K2 was acquired by Jarden Corporation, in Rye N.Y.

From the initial production of 250 pairs of skis in 1965, K2 quickly grew to producing 1,600 pairs the next year, 21,000 pairs by 1968, 400,000 pairs in 1978, and a peak of 450,00 pairs in 1990. K2 not only dominated American ski production but added boots, snowboards, cross country skis, inline skates and bikes to their product line. With the introduction of the K2Four “smart material” ski in 1995, K2 became the number one selling ski in America during the mid 1990s. But changes in the global economy meant that this would be the high point for K2 on Vashon.

K2 reached a peak employment of 750 in 1999, but in the fall of that year was forced to lay off 200 employees in a series of moves that shifted production to China. Distribution moved to Fife WA in 1995, and finally corporate and distribution headquarters moved to Seattle in 2006, ending 50 years of presence at the K2 site on Vashon Highway.

Bill Kirschner remained Chairman until his retirement in 1982. He was recognized for his accomplishments, being inducted into the U.S National Ski Hall of Fame in 2001, and receiving the Distinguished Service Award from University of Washington School of Engineering in 2005. He died April 23, 2006.

The K2 buildings currently sit empty, a stark reminder of Vashon's dependence on economic forces far beyond its shores, and of the many island industries that have experienced the booms and busts of the Pacific Northwest. The K2 Brand, however, is the number one ski brand in America and occupies the top three market positions in every other product category under the K2 Sports banners around the world. With subsidiaries in Canada, Central Europe, Japan, Korea and Scandinavia, K2 has achieved unparalleled success and continues to be a global leader across multiple categories of sporting goods. Not bad for an "Island tinkerer" with a good idea.