

Columbia Northwest Inc.

ACQUIRED LAST YEAR BY A PRIVATE EQUITY FIRM, THIS VENERABLE BUILDER OF A-FRAMED, HARD-SIDED CAMPING TRAILERS IS NOW AGGRESSIVELY EXPANDING ITS DEALER BASE — AND ITS PRODUCT LINE. BEST KNOWN FOR ITS ALINER LIGHTWEIGHT TOWABLES, THE COMPANY INTRODUCED ITS FIRST CONVENTIONAL, ENTRY-LEVEL TRAVEL TRAILER AT THE RECENT NATIONAL RV TRADE SHOW

■ BY BOB ASHLEY

■ PHOTOS BY SEAN STIPP



With Columbia Northwest Inc.'s headquarters in the small southwest Pennsylvania community of Kecksburg, Pa. — known internationally for a 1965 UFO incident — it might seem odd that the company's largest dealer is in Reykjavick, Iceland.

"They sold the largest number of Aliners last year — about 50 units," said Ned Collins, Columbia Northwest's new president and CEO. "The Aliner is small and can be towed by most of the European-built cars, it's well built, and because it has solid walls, it's very easy to heat so it allows them to use it year around."

Aliner's popularity in Iceland notwithstanding, an equity group headed by Collins that bought family-owned Columbia Northwest from the Tait family last April intends to aggressively

The Classic, one of six Aliner models available.



expand the manufacturer's North American dealer base during the next five years

Toward that end, Columbia Northwest introduced the T.R.E. ("Travel, Ramble & Explore") travel trailer and increased its dealership outlets by nearly 10% during November's 45th Annual National RV Trade Show in Louisville, Ky.

Columbia Northwest founder Ralph Tait started building Aliner trailers in a Bend, Ore., garage in the 1970s, for the first couple of years as a hobby. "He'd build one, drive it around to RV shows and dealerships until he sold it and then he'd build another one," Collins said. "The company had significant growth in the late 1980s and mid-1990s."

Originally from Pennsylvania, Tait, joined by sons Dave, Mark and Doug, founded Columbia Northwest in 1984 and within a couple of years returned to their home state.

With a mineral springs that still flows below, the current headquarters building was originally built in the early 1900s as a day spa, drawing clients from Pittsburgh, 40 miles to the northeast.

Collins came to Columbia Northwest when Pennsylvanian Growth Fund LLC, which acquires small- to medium-sized companies, quietly purchased 23-year-old Columbia Northwest in April 2007. "We did not want to make a bunch of buzz initially," Collins said. The low-key approach in which Columbia Northwest changed hands is emblematic of the Aliner itself, a small and lightweight towable that hasn't changed dramatically since Tait first designed it. "The Aliner represents the majority of our product," Collins said. "The concept has remained the same for 30 years."

Although classified as a folding camping trailer,



Aliner's fiberglass sidewalls — which set up almost automatically — appeal to others than the popup market's traditional entry-level campers. "Most of the people who buy our products are not comparing them to the tent trailer," Collins said. "Most of our owners have actually owned larger travel trailers. They are trending down to something smaller than can be towed by a small vehicle."

At the same time, Collins professed, Aliner has a specific niche that sets it apart from traditional RVs, too. "We are not

Ned Collins took over as president and CEO of Columbia Northwest Inc. after the company was purchased by Pennsylvania Growth Fund LLC in April 2007 and has led the expansion of its dealer base and product line.

VITAL statistics

COMPANY: Columbia Northwest Inc.
(www.aliner.com)

LOCATION: Kecksburg, Pa.

FOUNDED: 1984.

KEY PERSONNEL: Ned Collins, president and CEO; Bill Horvath, COO; Nancy Miller, director of sales; Cindy Linderman, bookkeeper; Chris Albright, Mike Shaulis, Michelle Pritts, customer service team.

PRIMARY PRODUCTS: Hard-sided "A-frame" folding camping trailers and small conventional travel trailers.

PHYSICAL FACILITIES: 118,000 square feet on 30 acres in Kecksburg

EMPLOYEES: about 65.



The T.R.E. line consists of three models: the Amelia (shown), Marco and Meriwether, all of which take their names from famous explorers.



TOP: Worker Bill Riggs prepares an Aliner for A-wall installation. **ABOVE:** Ted Hall and Riggs separate roof panels to allow the A-wall to be fitted. **RIGHT, TOP:** As seen by this interior, while the lightweight Aliner is small enough to be towed by even a six-cylinder-powered family sedan, the units are well-equipped. **RIGHT, BOTTOM:** Ned Collins discusses production issues with Sean Smith, Columbia Northwest's line supervisor.

PRODUCT profile

Columbia Northwest Inc. primarily builds unique A-frame, hard-sided folding camping trailers, but also has ventured into small, more traditional travel trailers.

Columbia Northwest's laminated fiberglass **ALINER** popup is available in four lengths ranging from nine to 18 feet with two or three floorplans in each model, including double dinette, rear sofa or rear mattress.

The nine-footer, with a dry weight of 450 pounds, is designed to accommodate one person and can be towed by a heavy-duty four-wheel ATV and some motorcycles.

MSRPs range from \$4,000 to \$18,000.

At the 2007 National RV Trade Show in Louisville, Ky., Columbia Northwest introduced the **T.R.E.** conventional, entry-level travel trailer with one 15-foot and two 18-foot floorplans. The T.R.E. is six inches wider than the Aliner, features heavier interior wall construction and is equipped with a bath with a full tub versus the Aliner's wet bath. MSRP: \$11,500.

a competitive substitute for travel trailers, but a unique product sought after by a small group of people. Our engineering is what makes the Aliner unique — and our focus on lightweight products.”

Nonetheless, Columbia Northwest dipped a toe into the traditional travel trailer market with the recent introduction of the T.R.E. conventional travel trailer. “Our travel trailer allows dealers to carry the same type of product that appeals to the same kind of customers as the Aliner,” Collins said.

Currently, Columbia Northwest products are being sold at 80 RV dealerships with a strong presence on both coasts and Canada. (An independent sister company also builds Aliners in Australia.)

Columbia Northwest's five-year goal is to have enough dealers for owners to find service outlets without having to drive more than 200 miles. Seven new dealerships signed up during the Louisville Show.

“A lot of our new dealers are guys who have been in bigger and heavier stuff and want to take on products that are more attuned with what's happening in the market,” Collins said. “We'd like to double the number of dealers that we have right now, particularly where we are under-represented in the mid-west and plains states.”

Because of its light weight, Aliner is particularly well positioned for the current marketplace, Collins said. The heaviest Aliner weighs 2,100 pounds.

“We are one step beyond where the market is headed,”

Collins said. “Most of the market is targeting 3,000 to 5,000 pounds. Our typical customer is an engineer driving a Subaru Outback. They like the uniqueness of the design and the quality of the construction, and it's different from what they see in the campground.”

“I see demand for our type of product growing during the next three to five years,” he added. “Chevy Suburban owners probably won't be looking for an SURV again when they buy their next vehicle. And if they want to keep camping, they are going to have to downsize the camper, too.” Δ



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