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Arthur Cinader Created J. Crew to Sell Preppy Clothing via Catalogs and Stores

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The J. Crew clothing brand, launched in 1983 by Arthur Cinader, evoked a world of effortless style, Ivy League schools and breezy summers on Nantucket—a version of the preppy lifestyle that became so well-known it served as a category for online dating services.

Among J. Crew’s big sellers in the early days were 100% cotton T-shirts in solid colors, with no logos or graphics. There were cashmere sweaters and stonewashed chinos with button flies. Women could buy bikini tops and bottoms separately to get the right fit for both.

Mr. Cinader delegated design oversight to his daughter Emily, in her early 20s when the firm was founded. He handled the finances and fussed over wording in catalogs, seeking what one colleague described as a tone of “sophisticated whimsy.”

A 1989 catalog captured his style. Under the heading of “artful simplicity,” the catalog offered “styles in the tradition of the Northeast Coast. Plain and simple stuff it would seem. But we conceive every J. Crew design in unique detail and color to yield an occasional quiet pleasure in the receptive soul.”

Family members recalled his habit of singing “Sloop John B,” a Beach Boys song, on chairlifts in Vail, Colo.

Mr. Cinader died in Santa Fe Oct. 11 of complications from a recent fall. He was 90.

In 1997, Mr. Cinader sold an 85% stake in the company to the TPG, a private-equity company, for around \$540 million. His family no longer has any ownership in J. Crew.

He gave few interviews and avoided sharing details about his own lifestyle. In a rare bit of bravado, he told the New York Times in 1989 that “wives of investment bankers talk about the latest J. Crew catalog the way they talk about shopping at Bergdorf’s.”

He had a demanding management style that some found inspiring and others intimidating. Associates spoke of his attention to fine detail and intolerance of distracting noises, such as ice clinking in a glass. Financial-review meetings began at 7:30 a.m. in the Manhattan headquarters, and attendees knew they had to arrive well-prepared.

Arthur Cinader (pronounced SIN-uh-der) was born Sept. 8, 1927, in New York. His father helped found a catalog company that offered the Popular Club Plan, selling clothes and home furnishings through agents calling on friends and neighbors

Mr. Cinader began high school at the Bronx High School of Science but then finished his high school studies in Arizona, where he moved for health reasons that his family declines to specify.

He enrolled at the University of Arizona at 17 and later studied medicine at Yale University but dropped out to join his father's business. In 1958, he married Johanna van Riel, a nurse from the Netherlands, whom he met while he was on a ski trip in Davos, Switzerland. Their honeymoon included fox hunting in Ireland.

The family acquired the First National Bank of Albuquerque in 1969, and Mr. Cinader ran that business for a spell. He also served on the board of the Santa Fe Opera in the 1970s.

In the early 1980s, having noted the success of the L.L. Bean and Lands' End catalogs, he decided to compete in that arena. The name Crew was a reference to the sport of rowing. The initial "J" was chosen most likely because it looked good graphically, a former executive said.

For the first six years, Manhattan-based J. Crew sold only via its catalogs. Then, in 1989, it began opening retail stores, beginning with one in New York's South Street Seaport. At that time, the company said that about 40% of its customers had done some postgraduate studies and that their hobbies typically included "skiing, tennis and avid reading." Mr. Cinader was gratified by the occasional reference to J. Crew in New Yorker cartoons.

In 1997, when Mr. Cinader sold the company, annual sales were around \$800 million.

The new owners shuffled through four CEOs in five years as they sought the right formula for J. Crew. Then, in 2003, they hired Millard "Mickey" Drexler, a former chief executive of the retailer Gap Inc., to run the company. Under Mr. Drexler, J. Crew regained its fashion verve, but it recently has struggled amid heavy debt and intensifying competition from online rivals with lower prices.

"The days of people wearing head-to-toe J. Crew are over," Carla Casella, an analyst at J.P. Morgan Chase & Co., said earlier this year.

Mr. Cinader had moved on from such worries. He read widely and supported the Cato Institute, the Institute on Religion and Public Life and the American Enterprise Institute.

He is survived by his wife, five children and 13 grandchildren.