

## GANT: HISTORY AND HERITAGE

### 1907–1927: ORIGINS

*“Having a legacy is something that sets you apart and gives you authenticity and credibility. And, most importantly, it gives you a platform and security as a brand.”*

*– Christopher Bastin, Creative Director of GANT*

The story of GANT begins with a young man who dreamed of a better life – and set sail for the New World to find it.

Berl Gantmacher was a miller’s son from Miropol in Ukraine who, by the time he was a teenager, had already made his way from the Russian Empire to Rotterdam. From there he continued west, embarking on the S.S. Potsdam, a Holland America Line steamship, and sailing to New York City. Archives at Ellis Island record him arriving on November 12, 1907.

He was 17 years old.

Like so many Jewish immigrants before him, he Americanized his name – Berl became Bernard – and set about improving himself. He enrolled in night classes at the Columbia University’s College of Pharmacy but during the day he found work in the city’s bustling garment industry on the Lower East Side. It was hard work – he was as a “closer,” someone who assembles garments – but it developed his entrepreneurial zeal and taught him tailoring. It also introduced him to Rebecca Rose, a woman with a job making buttonholes and sewing on buttons. She would later become his wife.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Bernard joined the US Army and went to fight in France. Upon completing his military service he returned to New York with a renewed desire to succeed. He graduated from college, married Rebecca, and decided the time was right to go into business for himself. With his partner Morris Shapiro he founded the Par-Ex Shirt Company based in Brooklyn.

Par-Ex made shirts *par excellence* for other brands, including Brooks Brothers. The new company was a success, and in 1927 the Par-Ex Shirt Company relocated to upscale New Haven, Connecticut.

### 1927-1949: BIRTH OF A BRAND

At the time the town of New Haven was one of America’s capitals of clothing manufacture. One reason for this was that it had a large community of Italian immigrants, many of whom were talented garment workers.

Times were good for the Gantmachers. The business grew – and so did the family. Two of Bernard and Rebecca’s children, Marty and Elliot, would go on to spur GANT to great success. The boys, born in 1921 and 1926, grew up in New Haven and helped at the shirt factory by sweeping floors and fusing collars. They were also aware of what was happening on the campus of nearby Yale University, which would change the course of American fashion.

The outbreak of World War II interrupted their careers and both sons enlisted in the army. Upon returning home in the 1940s they studied at the University of Connecticut. Marty specialized in business administration while Elliot majored in marketing. Then, armed with their new skills, they went back into the family business.

The brothers saw that America was entering a period of rapid and profound change. The war had blown away many old traditions. New kinds of art, music and fashion were spreading across the nation. Marty and Elliot saw an opportunity – and seized it. They convinced their father the time was right to leave Par-Ex and the contracting business behind. Instead of making clothing for other labels, they would sell perfectly tailored shirts under their own label. In April 1949, GANT Inc. was born.

## THE 1950s: EXPANSION AND INNOVATION

*“They knew who their customers were and they chose to speak directly to them. It was a very modern way of advertising.”*  
– *Christopher Bastin, Creative Director of GANT*

Marty and Elliot understood the family business. They were so closely identified with it they even changed their own name – Gantmacher became Gant. They also understood the power of advertising. They wanted their products to always be seen in the right places. That meant supplying only the best stores in town, and advertising in *The New Yorker*.

The first issue of *The New Yorker* had been published in February 1925 with a drawing of a monocle-wearing dandy on the cover. It was a new kind of magazine that appealed to a new kind of readership.

*“The New Yorker will be the magazine which is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque,”* wrote founding editor Harold Ross. *“It will not be concerned in what she is thinking about. This is not meant in disrespect, but The New Yorker is a magazine avowedly published for a metropolitan audience.”*

It attracted the best and wittiest writers, everyone from J. D. Salinger and Vladimir Nabokov to Dorothy Parker and F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda. It was not only choosy about which writers it would publish, but also which adverts it would run. It declined commercials that didn’t fit the magazine’s tone.

One of the companies that did fit the bill was GANT. At first all Marty and Elliot could afford were 1/8 page black-and-white ads every three months. Gradually they moved up to bigger and more frequent ads, featuring the oxford shirt in four different photos and four different situations, then ultimately running eight full-color ads in one year. The campaign spread the message that GANT produced the sort of shirts that the bright young sophisticates of the day were wearing.

## THE MARK OF QUALITY

*“I’m not entirely sure why they chose to put a diamond around the G, or if it even was intentionally symbolizing a diamond. But whatever the reasons, it led to people no longer caring about what the neck label said and only looking for the G.”*  
– *Christopher Bastin, Creative Director of GANT*

From the outset, GANT was known for the quality of its shirts. In the early days, when the company was in the business of supplying shirts to other retailers, a discreet GANT trademark was added to the tail: a little diamond with a “G” in it. This mark assured the customer of quality just as much as the retailer label that was stitched inside the collar.

By the mid-1950s, the Diamond G had become part of American menswear history – a distinctive sign of superior quality that helped make the signature shirts coveted bestsellers, with demand far outstripping supply.

The 1950s was a time of unprecedented growth in the USA and GANT shirts helped define the smart-yet-casual look that dominated in the post-war years. GANT’s detailed craftsmanship and effortless American style appealed to a generation of men who had spent years wearing military issue clothing and who had now returned home to take their place in the booming middle class.

They appreciated the perfect roll of a GANT collar, and the quality of fabric one could expect with a GANT shirt. And soon they would appreciate another quality that GANT pioneered: color. For decades the plain white shirt had dominated in menswear but that was all about to change forever. An explosion of color was coming – and that explosion was sparked in the town of New Haven, Connecticut.

## 1954-1959: CREATING A NEW LOOK

The term Ivy League was first used in the 1930s to refer to a group of northeastern US colleges that were sporting rivals. However it soon became synonymous with more than just sports. It denoted academic excellence,

prestige, tradition – and a new and relaxed style that would forever change American fashion. A style that became known as the Ivy League Look.

In 1954, *LIFE* magazine declared New Haven the home of the Ivy League Look. The reason for this was that New Haven had not only a thriving garment industry but was also the home of Yale University. It was the ideal place for the Ivy League Look to flourish.

The new look was a way of dressing well without necessarily dressing up. It featured items such as white buckskin shoes, grey flannel slacks, button-down shirts and jackets with a natural shoulder. It was a more casual look, in sharp contrast to the padded-shoulder and double-breasted style suits that dominated the pre-war years.

Marty and Elliot were instinctively aware of what was happening in their hometown. They saw the emerging style and recognized that it dovetailed with what GANT was doing. They started experimenting with shirts in different fabrics, more styles and added bold colors to the pale 1950s palette. The family took pride in their role in shaping the bright new look, and in 1954 the company's name was changed to GANT of New Haven.

## **BIG STORE ON CAMPUS**

For students, the Yale Co-op was more than just the on-campus store where you could stock up on everything from toothbrushes to textbooks. It was also where they went to buy clothing and as the Ivy League Look exploded the Yale Co-op was the nexus of the new style.

The store had been founded in 1885 and was the second-oldest university store in the States (just beaten by the Harvard Coop). It supplied generations of students with the clothes that would become Ivy League essentials: natural-shoulder suits, regimental ties, V-necks sweaters, sports jackets, khakis, wing-tip shoes and loafers – all the things needed to look cool on campus.

However, GANT's line of shirts for the Yale Co-op store was a sensation. The button-downs flew off the shelves, and became an integral part of Ivy League Look. Soon the button-down shirt was found not just on campus but across the country as it became an essential garment for the stylish American man of the 50s and 60s. And for anyone who wanted the best, the button-down shirt was now synonymous with GANT.

## **PERFECTING THE BUTTON-DOWN**

*“Bernard Gantmacher was a collar specialist and very meticulous about how the roll of the collar looked. It's all about geometrics, where you place the button-down button in*

*relation to how high the collar stand is and how long the collar points are. GANT was obsessed with it.”*  
– **Christopher Bastin, Creative Director of GANT**

The button-down shirt had first been worn by English polo players but by the late 1940s it was an essential item in the wardrobe of a well-dressed man. In America it was originally a Brooks Brothers creation dating from the 1920s but GANT played a major role in its evolution and made it their own.

There are many reasons why this happened. Quality was one but there were also several aspects to the shirt's construction that were not only unique but in certain cases extremely difficult to copy. Among these was the shape formed by the front edges of the buttoned collar. It took the combination of Bernard's technical skill and Marty and Elliot's fashion sense to perfect it and it became known as the perfect roll.

The perfect roll wasn't the only signature detail that GANT perfected. Other small touches that customers appreciated included:

-- The locker loop on the back of the shirt that can be used to hang the shirt to keep it wrinkle-free in the locker room. It even became a part of Ivy League dating lore that a guy would remove the loop when he was going steady with a girl (and she, in return, would wear his scarf).

-- The box pleat, at the back of the shirt, that gives the wearer greater freedom of movement.

-- The back collar button that keeps the tie in place and prevents the collar from riding up.

-- In 1963 the button tab won an award from *Esquire* magazine. Elliot invented the button tab to make the tie and the shirt match perfectly. Together with the perfect roll, the tie knot blends in to the shirt and creates that ideal Ivy League look.

At the same time as they were perfecting the men's shirt, GANT noticed that it wasn't just men who coveted their clothing. Inspired by the number of women who was borrowing their boyfriends' and husbands' shirts, they realized that both sexes appreciate quality clothing. GANT launched their women's shirts with the slogan "For women GANT makes shirts, not blouses."

The company also decided to expand its range. Having torn up the rulebook when it came to smart casual clothing, it was time to do the same to sportswear.

## **THE 1960s: EVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION**

*“Let’s not try to be everything to everybody. We’re individuals.  
When you think for yourself you can be tastefully different.”*  
– Elliot Gant

As the new decade unfolded, the Ivy League Look became even more distinctive and debonair. GANT developed more and more boldly colored shirts in unusual fabrics including Madras, candy-stripe and tartan patterned shirts. These shirts were in tune with the revolutionary mood of the Sixties. Marty and Elliot even forbade their sales staff from wearing white shirts at work.

A new chapter was beginning for the company, and with it came a new name. Now the company was known simply as GANT Shirtmakers, reflecting the excellence and cultural importance of the company’s signature item.

## **THE 1970s – AND BEYOND**

*“Whereas the Ivy League came with a set look, American Sportswear is much wider and contains all kind of casual wear. Ivy moves in cycles, American Sportswear is what we did and still do, regardless of current trends.”*  
– Christopher Bastin, Creative Director of GANT

In 1971 the company produced their first collection of American Sportswear. Despite the fact that the company had been sold to Consolidated Foods in 1968, Marty and Elliot remained at the helm to oversee the first stage of GANT’s transformation from an iconic shirt maker into a general sportswear brand.

GANT sportswear took its inspiration from the Ivy League universities but with a more international slant. GANT began offering knit shirts, especially Rugby shirts, which were sold under their own sub-brand Rugger that was introduced in 1974, and eventually trousers and accessories from 1981.

In the early 80s Pyramid Sportswear of Sweden acquired the rights to design and market the GANT brand outside the States. A European sense of sophistication was blended with the brand’s all-American DNA, and GANT grew to become a global brand.

GANT now offers menswear, womenswear, children’s clothing, home products and fragrances through licensees. It is a brand built on the values of authenticity, quality, sport and timeless good taste, and it continues to develop and define comfortable, style-conscious clothing. Despite this, it hasn’t forgotten its origins. In 2010 GANT opened a new store back where it all began – in New Haven, Connecticut.

## GUARDING A LEGACY

*“When I dig through a thrift shop the only shirts that are colorful and/or have patterns are the GANT shirts. They invented that look.”*

*– Christopher Bastin, Creative Director of GANT*

The breadth and quality of GANT shirts can be seen in the company archive where original pieces from the different decades are collected.

The archive holds numerous examples of our classic stripes, checks, Madras shirts, and other original designs. It is a reminder of GANT’s true heritage and serves as a never-ending source of daily inspiration. For Creative Director Christopher Bastin, the archive is more than just an exclusive collection of rare items. Having the heritage within reach is a priceless asset. It is a hands-on source of inspiration

Since joining GANT in 2004, Bastin has been searching through bricks-and-mortar stores and online retailers in search of unique GANT shirts from the early years and has been back to New Haven, Connecticut.

“To be able to stand there in front of the factories from the 1950s, to touch and feel our own history and see the remains in there, it gives you an immediate sense of belonging to something greater, knowing that you are a big part of US clothing history. There are very few of the brands from that era still around. After all, if you don’t know where you’re from, how can you know where to go?”