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Gamo firm buys Daisy; Rogers jobs said to stay

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Longtime Arkansas-based air rifle company Daisy Outdoor Products is under new ownership and is merging with Gamo Outdoor USA, an air rifle manufacturer based in Florida, the Gamo company announced Wednesday.

Daisy, which has manufactured air rifles for 130 years, moved from Plymouth, Mich., to Rogers in 1958.

It was in Rogers that Jean Shepherd, the author of the book series that inspired the 1983 movie *A Christmas Story*, approached Daisy to make the movie's iconic Red Ryder BB gun.

"Shepherd insisted that when he was a child in the postwar '40s, he owned a Red Ryder carbine-action, 200-shot, range model air rifle with a compass in the stock and 'the thing that tells time,' by which he meant a sundial," said Joe Murfin, vice president of public relations for Daisy.

Except no such rifle existed.

Daisy worked with Shepherd to design his idyllic Red Ryder BB gun and produced six for the film.

Before *A Christmas Story*, Daisy had established itself as the maker of America's first air rifle.

"When you say 'Daisy' to somebody, or if you ask them how did you start shooting, they'll tell you the first gun they had was a Daisy BB gun," Murfin said.

He said it's this history and brand reputation that caught the interest of New York private-equity investment firm Bruckmann, Rosser, Sherrill & Co., which owns Gamo Outdoor.

The firm bought Daisy for an undisclosed amount. The details of the company's relationship with Gamo have not been finalized. Murfin said Daisy will likely fall under the Gamo and Gamo USA umbrella of brands.

Murfin said he does not expect any immediate changes in the Rogers plant's staffing or operations. Daisy employs 65 people year-round. The staff increases to about 100 in the months leading up to Christmas and peak hunting season.

"The Daisy brand name will exist and so will Gamo," Murfin said. "Both companies have strong brand recognition and significant histories behind those brands that we are very proud of."

Gamo Outdoor, a European company, began producing air guns in Spain in 1961. Gamo entered the American market by starting Gamo Outdoor USA, based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., in 1995.

Bruckmann, Rosser, Sherrill & Co. bought Gamo Outdoor in 2013. The firm owns several other arms producers, including New Archery Products, Remington and Magpul.

"We believe this is a great combination as Gamo is deeply rooted in the outdoors, Daisy is a part of Americana and we both share a passion for the shooting sports," said Keith

Higginbotham, president of Gamo Outdoor USA and the president of the new company formed by Gamo and Daisy.

Gamo Outdoor markets its air rifles to adults, while Daisy markets to adolescents.

"By combining the two companies, there's very little overlap in the product line," Murfin said. "So it allows us, together, to go to market with a comprehensive assortment of products that cover the whole spectrum of consumers."

J.R. Shaw, executive director of Visit Rogers, which is a division of the Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce, said the Daisy plant and the Daisy Airgun Museum, run by a separate foundation, attract tourists to the Northwest Arkansas city.

"It's an American icon, an American success story that's become an integral part of tourism in Northwest Arkansas and Rogers, in particular," Shaw said.

Last week, Daisy attracted 2,000 people to Rogers for the annual Daisy National BB Gun Championship Match, which is open to children ages 8-15.

Raymond Burns, the CEO of the Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce, said Rogers "bleeds Daisy."

Burns' mother worked at Daisy for 30 years and was one of the company's first employees in Rogers. Burns said the children of the employees were given air rifles every Christmas at the company Christmas party.

"We were regarded as Daisy brats, which meant we got to play with all the new guns first before they went to market," Burns said.

Burns has fond memories of playing on the factory floor before being shoed out by security officers.

To Burns, the Daisy plant put Rogers on the map. After Daisy settled into the town, several other manufacturing plants followed.

Every five years, Daisy produces a limited number of commemorative Red Ryder carbine-action, 200-shot, range model air rifles with a compass in the stock and "the thing which tells time."

Burns has about a dozen Red Ryders. The first commemorative edition hangs on the wall in his office.

Murfin said the plant's tradition will stick around even as company ownership changes.

"In 2013, we put out our 30th anniversary commemorative rifle, and probably in 2018, we'll put out our 35th anniversary rifle just in case you didn't get yours," Murfin said.

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