APPAREL INSIDERS®

Vol. II · Issue 7 $4.00

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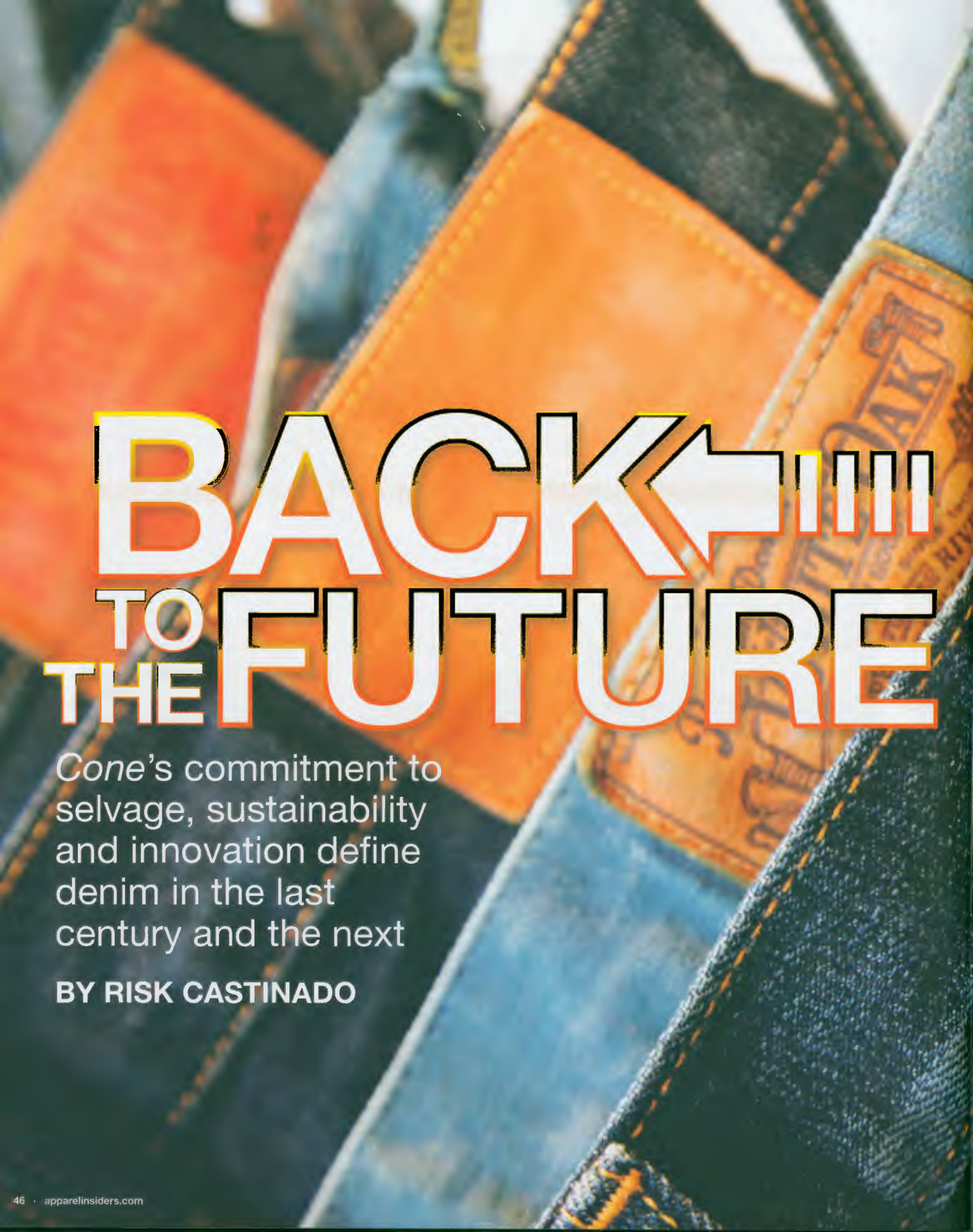
FANTASTIC FOUR



BACK TO THE FUTURE

Cone's commitment to selvage, sustainability and innovation define denim in the last century and the next

BY RISK CASTINADO


Premium Denim
WHITE OAK
MADE IN U.S.A.
NARROW GOODS INC.
COPPER RIVETS
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American Draper looms vibrate rhythmically against wood floors in North Carolina, just as they have since the '40s, conjuring narrow bolts of selvage fabrics; in Mexico, state of the art facilities construct a stretch denim so unique that it's patented; an hour outside of Shanghai, a mill weaves yarn covered in recycled beer bottles, while setting eco-friendly standards in wastewater management.

It all ties back to Cone, the oldest operating mill in the United States, and a company with indigo running through its veins. Only now they've gone global, and they've dedicated resources to not only brainstorm new ideas, but to think those new products into market through Cone 3D, a company incubator.

Founded in 1891 by brothers Moses and Ceasar Cone, the now publicly held company has a client list that reads like a phone book of denim brands, including a relationship with Levi Strauss that dates back to 1915. Headquartered since 1905 in White Oak, where their extensive archive is accessible to clients, the original Greensboro, North Carolina facility has used the same narrow looms for seventy years to create woven edge fabrics. What's more, it's reportedly the only commercial mill offering selvage denim in the United States, making them a favorite of premium brands such as True Religion, and boutique brands obsessed with perfection. "White Oak is legendary in the world of denim," notes Tony Patella of Tellason, which uses their selvage denim exclusively in its jeans cut and sewn in San Francisco. An interior tag on Tellason products even gives a shout out to its provenance: "Made from White Oak Cone Denim." And Scott Morrison of 3x1, which creates bespoke, individually numbered jeans in New York City, calls White Oak an "authentic, yet relevant, piece of living American denim history," adding, "When it comes to spinning, indigo dying, and shuttle loom weaving, it's hard to imagine finding a better resource anywhere in the world."

"There's something that happens with those particular looms that we can't control, which is what makes the fabric beautiful," says Kara Nicholas, vice president of product development and marketing. "It's using low technology to create fabric, so there is inherent character, subtle differences in the denim. It's something that is woven into the fabric, so to speak."

But White Oak is only one third of the story. Expanding to serve the supply chain in Central America and Asia puts Cone where the clients are. Cone built mills in Parras and Yecapixtla, Mexico in 1995 and 1999, respectively, and in Jiaxing, China, in 2007. And Cone's quality commitment and ecological concerns have traveled with them. "We have not cut corners in any way in our facilities or made them less environmentally friendly," notes Steve Maggard, vice president of operations, planning and forecasting for Cone Denim. "We take our workers' safety very, very seriously. We take compliance with water discharge law and air discharge very, very seriously, and we have invested huge amounts of money making sure that all of our facilities are compliant with code and are world class."

While the selvage fabrics are only available in White Oak, any other denim product offered by Cone is available to clients at all three platforms. This includes Cone's patented S-Gene collection, in which the weft yarn has a core of spandex for stretch and polyester for the recovery, and is then wrapped in cotton. And in the last two years Cone has also developed Sustainblue, a collection made with yarn actually covered in recycled bottles and food trays to give them their color, creating a "denim that looks different than your typical fabric," says Nicholas. "We thought, when we tell a story, let's make it something that the consumer

can see visually. Bottom line, it had to be a fabric that was aesthetically pleasing on its own. It had to meet the market demand and be comfortable. It wasn't just because it was recycled."

Maggard notes that, "Quite honestly, a lot of people historically haven't been willing to pay a premium in price to be able to do that. Unfortunately, a lot of things that you're willing to do to protect the environment are not cost-neutral. But we're now seeing that companies like Levi's and others, they're willing to go out and actually invest in that because it does have that story. They're in turn marketing that to their customers."

Cone's newest project, Cone 3D, is not a denim but an entire group within the company determined "to solve unarticulated problems," as its director of denim innovation, Tom Tantillo, points out. You might say it seeks to give you what you want before you knew you needed it, so that you can wonder how you ever lived without it.

Cone 3D will "get out in front of what we would consider a normal product development cycle and try to identify emerging trends, emerging technologies, emerging fibers ahead of the game, and actually try and bring those to market," says Maggard. "It's an incubator for innovation where we try to identify needs that aren't currently being met, or products that don't even currently exist in the market."

Cone 3D's first initiative was an exclusive developing agreement signed with CRAiLAR in which Cone partnered with the company, agreeing to jointly develop a new flax fiber for use in denim. CRAiLAR states that fabric made from the flax promises far less water and chemical usage, and thus a "clean record from dirt to shirt," while feeling identical to cotton. "It's still early on," notes Maggard, "but there's definitely a sustainable aspect to that fiber. There are some things that they've seen in their laboratories: moisture management and dye uptake. We haven't really gotten to that point where we can confirm or verify that those properties can be transferred into a denim garment, but we're very eager to find out."

Maggard projects that in Cone 3D's future, "We are looking at technical denims. Resilient, very strong denims, maybe for work wear. We're looking at moisture wicking applications, and we're looking at ways that heat can be kept in and have insulating properties for garments to keep you warm in the snow. But more than anything, Cone 3D is making a statement that we're going to be focused on new innovation and we're going to allocate resources to that. We are just getting started, but we do have several products of that type in action already.

"At the end of the day," says Maggard, "we have to identify things that can be marketed, that can hit price points and that do have a customer base out there. We're going to be looking for innovation, but not just innovation for innovation's sake. You can have a very sexy piece of denim, but if it costs $30 a yard, it's just not economically feasible. What we want to generate the ideas, but then find a way to bring those to the market at a price point that is reasonable."

Explaining that in the early 20th century Cone advertised to the end consumer in publications such as Progressive Farmer or Country Gentleman, Nicholas notes that "the customer found it appealing that the denim was strong, it would last, it would hold its deep, dark color. It's so interesting to see today where things have come. On the runways, it harkens back to its roots. A lot of the brands today are doing the work wear silhouettes. They are inspired by all the details of the garments that were worn back in the '30s and '40s." Past, present and future, Cone and denim are woven together.