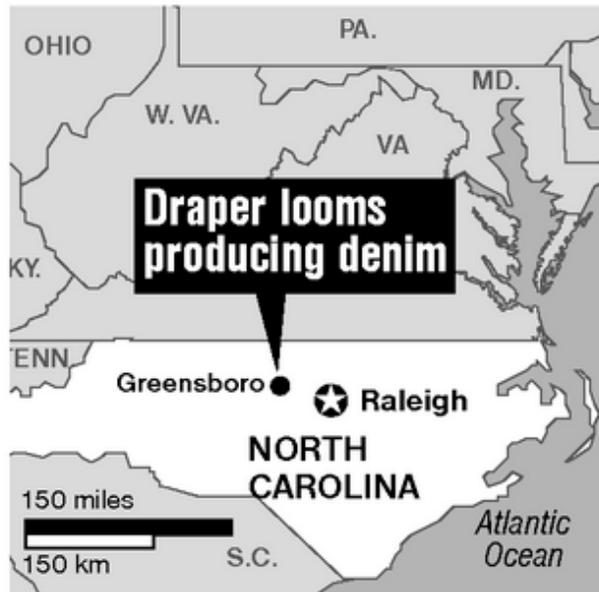


High-fashion denim made with vintage Draper machines



Thomas W. McGovern, chairman of Hopedale's Little Red Shop Museum Committee and a Draper employee from 1966 to 1969, stands next to the first automated Draper loom on display at the museum. (T&G Staff/CHRISTINE PETERSON) **By Lisa Eckelbecker TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF** leckelbecker@telegram.com



T&G Staff

HOPEDALE — In a compact museum building, overlooking Hopedale Pond that once housed loom maker Draper Corp. sit three antique looms, silent remnants of a former

manufacturing powerhouse.

The Little Red Shop Museum is devoted to Draper's history, yet the looms that Draper workers produced are anything but relics of the past. In a Greensboro, N.C., factory hundreds of miles south of Hopedale, International Textile Group Inc.'s Cone Denim factory operates 32 vintage Draper looms to make denim for high-end jeans that can fetch well over \$100 a pair.

The price of fabric made on vintage Draper machinery amazes some Blackstone Valley history buffs and former Draper workers, but the enduring prowess of Draper looms does not.

"They were designed to operate for long periods of time, so they do," said Kevin C. Klyberg, a National Park Service ranger with the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.

Draper's origins date to 1816, and the loom maker eventually came to occupy 1.4 million square feet of space in a sprawling brick Hopedale complex. The company sold its looms to buyers across the globe before shutting down in 1980.

One of those buyers was Cone Denim, a company that put its Draper looms into storage in the 20th century as market pressures pushed textile manufacturers to adopt modern, high-speed equipment. Still, some people thought newer denim lacked something, according to Delores Sides, Cone Denim director of corporate communications.

"We got denim that was smooth and free of imperfections, and then they looked around and said, 'Where's the character?' " Mrs. Sides said.

Cone Denim's White Oak facility brought its vintage Draper looms out of storage in the late 1980s, installed them in an area with wood floors that would allow the machines to rock as fly-shuttles zoom back and forth, and started producing cloth.

The result is a sturdy fabric appreciated for its selvage, the neatly woven edge of the fabric, as well as its durability and imperfections.

"We were always trying to figure out ways to take those nubs out," said former Draper machine design engineer Eugene Phillips, now Hopedale's town coordinator. "Who knew?"

Cone Denim does not disclose its customers' names, but plenty of retailers make no secret of using the company's denim in apparel. Hip men's clothing maker Bonobos Inc. sells "old loom selvage" jeans made from Cone Denim "woven on antique shuttle looms" for \$175. J. Crew Group Inc.'s stores sell men's Cone Denim jeans for \$198. Radio host and writer Glenn Beck's 1791 Supply & Co. sells a made-in-America Cone Denim jean for \$129.99.

The trade group Cotton Inc. reports that the average American owns seven pairs of denim jeans. Yet most of those jeans are made overseas. Women's jeans mostly come from Asia. Jeans for men and boys increasingly originate in Mexico.

Ryan R. Berger, an apparel designer for Massachusetts-based New England Outfitter who

has written about Cone Denim on his blog at www.simplethreads.co, owns several pairs of jeans and a jacket made of Cone Denim. He said he appreciates the fact the fabric is a high-quality product made in the United States.

"There's just so much more behind it than just a pair of jeans," Mr. Berger said. "There's so much more that goes into it."

The price of Draper-loomed denim jeans shocked Thomas W. McGovern, chairman of Hopedale's Little Red Shop Museum Committee and a Draper employee from 1966 to 1969, but not the endurance of the looms.

"It doesn't surprise me with the quality they put into developing these looms," he said.

The cast-iron construction and ease of repair of Draper looms may have something to do with that.

Rick Randall, exhibit specialist at Lowell National Historical Park in Lowell, searched nationwide in the 1980s for Draper looms to fill the park's Boott Cotton Mills Museum. He found a cache in storage in Tennessee, but he also found looms rusting in fields where they had been discarded.

"These are very rugged looms," he said. "The parts that wear out are mostly made of wood and steel."

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