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Cone Denim expands selvedge denim capacity



Cone Denim's Period Loom

Cone Denim's historic White Oak mill, Greensboro NC, the oldest operating denim mill in the United States, will increase its production of authentic vintage selvedge denim by 25 percent. The denim specialist has been installing additional American Draper X3 looms in response to the markets growing demand for Made in the USA selvedge denim.

White Oak is currently the only mill in the United States producing narrow selvedge denim on fly shuttle looms, which date back to the 1940s. The installation is expected to be complete by the end of August 2013. "Demand continues to grow for authentic Made in the USA selvedge denims and has exceeded the capacity of our current X3 looms," commented Kara Nicholas, vice president, product development and marketing.

Cone had preserved a number of shuttle looms back in the mid 1980s and over time had pulled them back into production. "With no more looms in storage we began searching; this is an extraordinary find for us," says Nicholas. The discovery of the additional looms came after an exhaustive search which took the Cone team through scrap yards, grassy fields and abandoned mills and eventually led them to South Carolina. "In some ways finding the looms may have been the easiest part," said Nicholas. "The restoration of the looms has been tedious and would have been impossible without the expertise of our technicians, many of which worked on the original X3 looms." Work has included overhauling and reassembling the looms and fabricating many of the accessory parts in house.

The reclaimed X3 looms will operate beside White Oak's previously restored shuttle looms which were brought back into operation in the late 1990s. Coveted by denim aficionados around the world, White Oak selvedge X3 denims are unique with a depth and dimension different from other denims. Skilled workers carefully tend the looms, which sit on turn of the century wooden floors that move in a rhythmic sway to create vintage denim constructions reminiscent of the early 1900s.

"We recognize the unique capabilities of White Oak and the growing demand for Made in America denim fabrics and garments," says Ken Kunberger, president & chief operating officer for Cone Denim and International Textile Group. "It is exciting to strategically invest in our U.S. manufacturing base and to further the White Oak legacy. Our customers and the consumer's passion for authentic American selvedge denim coupled with the history and heritage of White Oak continues to grow." The expansion also provides an avenue to share and transfer knowledge of shuttle weaving. Nicholas explained: "Vintage weaving is more art than science. Each loom that is installed gives us an opportunity to continue to master the intricacies of shuttle weaving and transfer that know-how to the next generation."

The employment of the additional period looms will help the company increase its overall capacity by about 25 percent. Despite this Cone Denim did not reveal its present productive capacity.