



Cone Denim celebrates 125th anniversary

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International Textile Group's Ken Kunberger (above) and Brad Johnson give a tour of the Cone Denim plant on Fairview Street to the band Big Head Todd and the Monsters. After the tour, Kunberger presented the band with four pair of custom-fitted, one-of-a-kind jeans with the band name stamped on the inside pocket (below left).



Kunberger, the president and CEO of International Textile Group, poses with the autographed black and silver Fender Stratocaster given to him by the band Big Head Todd and the Monsters, which features (from left) Jeremy Lawton, Todd Mohr, Brian Nevin and Rob Squires (above right)

The company's group manufacturing director, Brad Johnson, is getting set to lead a tour of the plant for a small group of print and TV media, dignitaries, friends and the band Big Head Todd and the Monsters. (More on that later.)

As Johnson explains the technical details of the weaving process, Kunberger interjects an aside about Cone Denim as well as the place of denim in American lore.

"This plant is the Mecca for true denim aficionados," he says. "This is the equivalent of a band or musician going to Graceland; this is an old panhead Harley; this is a '68 Mustang. The history and heritage of this building brings in people from all over the world. We get designers from big brands as well as startups, history buffs, Japanese businessmen and now a band in here.

"Denim goes hand in hand with America, back to the ranchers and cowboys and coal miners," Kunberger says. "Likewise, it is associated with music, too, especially rock and roll, and I'm excited to have a band in here."

If denim is woven into the fabric of America, then Cone Mills is woven onto the fabric of Greensboro as inextricably as the various textiles it has produced since the late 1800s. The character of the city would have taken on a far different guise had it not been for the enormous manufacturing plants that bore the Cone imprimatur.

As its peak, the various plants — White Oak, Proximity and Revolution, among others — employed more than 10,000 workers, and the mill village around it was literally a town within a town, with its own schools, hospital, general stores, ballpark and post office. Without doubt, the family name is the most ubiquitous among all the city fathers and forebears, as evidenced by the numerous buildings, roads and landmarks that bear the Cone name. Their heirs' influence lives on even today.

Yet, as manufacturing became a global enterprise, the various cotton mills scattered around North Carolina and the South that produced hosiery, flannel, denim and other textiles eventually either moved overseas or shut down entirely. Revolution and Proximity are long gone, their football-field-sized plants either repurposed or lying dormant.

But White Oak lives on. It survived by finding a niche market of unique, high-end denim that can only be produced in the White Oak plant. The one-of-a-kind pattern is produced by a combination of the antique Draper looms, 51 of which were in operation that day, and the original maple floors. When the looms are running, it makes the floor bounce slightly, creating a weave pattern that cannot be replicated on modern machines.

"The uniqueness of the garment is something the consumer values," Johnson says. "People appreciate the character and heritage that comes from this place."

Cone Denim is celebrating its 125th anniversary April 5 and 6 with several functions downtown, at Cone Denim Entertainment Center and at nearby Revolution Mill. It's also planning a yearlong series of activities highlighting its significance to the community. Greensboro Mayor Nancy Vaughan is proclaiming April 6 "Cone Denim Day."

In 2003, Cone Mills Corp. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, and its assets were acquired by W. L. Ross and Co. It then merged with what remained of Burlington Industries, thus forming its present incarnation, International Textile Group, with its signature unit being Cone Denim.

But what does all this have to do with Big Head Todd and the Monsters? Well, it so happens that Kunberger is a huge fan of the Denver-based quartet (who played for the Broncos Super Bowl victory parade), and it also so happened that they were playing at the Cone Denim Entertainment Center that Sunday. After the tour he presented the band with four pair of custom-fitted, one-of-a-kind jeans with the band name stamped on the inside pocket.

"What we plan to do during the next year is give certain celebrities who are in town for a show or event a pair of our jeans," Kunberger says with a smile. "It seemed fitting to get Todd (Mohr) and the band in here for the tour to kind of kick off our 125th anniversary."

Oh, and in return, the band presented him with an autographed black and silver Fender Stratocaster.

"Seems like a fair trade," a beaming Kunberger says.