

Cone Denim Leadership Reflects on 125 Years of History

CLEO LEVIN APRIL 20, 2016



Visiting Greensboro, North Carolina, the shadow of an earlier era is present, when Cone Mills dominated the entire town. However, the core of the company is still alive and well at the White Oak facility, a potent distillation of everything the mill has stood for in its 125 years: quality, heritage and community.

Though White Oak represents just a fraction of the business Cone Mill used to hold—in its heyday the company operated 3,000 looms—the mill is vital with dedicated, long-time employees and constant business. One narrative about American textile manufacturing is a sad one about business leaving America, but another narrative highlights the new manufacturing that has cropped up, a small but passionate community of makers.

Ken Kunberger, Cone President, said of White Oak, “It’s a very niche, boutique business. It’s very concentrated on eight to ten million yards.”

“We could go back and rehash, oh yes, they closed down how many mills in the U.S.?” said Kara Nicholas, vice president product design and marketing. “But I feel like the more positive message is that manufacturing in the U.S. can work as long as you are making the right products to meet the market needs and working with the customers.”

She continued, “It’s not just a story. As a company you wouldn’t keep something open just for a story, you need to make it a successful business.”

For Cone Mills, as one door closed, another opened. In the ’80s and ’90s, as cut-and-sew was increasingly moving out of America, Cone’s business was initially hurt. However, brands realized they weren’t getting the same quality abroad and started to buy and export White Oak fabrics to their overseas facilities.

Luckily, Cone Mills had hung onto a piece of history. In the mid-80s, the company preserved some of their shuttle looms last used for production in the 1940s. As higher-end denim brands started launching in the ’90s, there was a pickup in interest in higher-end denim and the selvedge product.

The company has been gradually bringing back the shuttle looms ever since and refurbishing them from the actual metal, all the way up. Currently, White Oak operates 51 looms and is looking to add about eight more a year. White Oak is currently the only mill in the United States manufacturing on shuttle looms.

As the mill continues to add looms, selvedge denim is becoming increasingly sought-after. Though it was once reserved for real denimhead brands, more and more companies are now offering a selvedge jean in addition to wide offerings. “I think that’s because the consumer is starting to recognize and understand a little more about the narrow goods, the specialty of the selvedge denims,” Nicholas said.

Cone Denim has grown internationally, with a mill in China and two in Mexico, however, White Oak remains the core of the business. Kunberger said, “This facility has always stayed within Cone, it’s like our tip of the iceberg. It’s our development incubator, everything kind of starts here and then we work our way into the other plants.”

The mill’s newest innovations, its sustainable and stretch collections, both started at White Oak. Cone has reached a new level of innovation since the teams at Cone and Burlington Labs began collaborating. Cone and Burlington both entered under the ITG umbrella in 2004, and now their research and development offices are located right next to each other. Burlington, which produces technical fabrics, including medical and military fabrics, draws a different group of collaborators from Cone and has introduced a whole range of possibilities for new denim fabrics.

A recent example of Cone teaming up with a Burlington collaborator is Cone’s sustainable collection with Patrick Yarns, a company that uses PET materials to make colorful yarns from materials like food trays, ketchup bottles and beer bottles.

Innovation has generally become a larger part of Cone’s offerings. Remarkably, the mill’s stretch fabrics, called the S-gene Collection, went from a few hundred thousand yards in 2011 to 15-20 million yards and 20 percent of their offerings today. The mill combines its current innovation with its emphasis on honoring the past. Kunberger explained that though heritage may be what the mill is known for, they now produce 100 million yards of fabric internationally, so they have to carry a wide variety of products to appeal to all their customers.

He said, “We will consistently launch despite how old we are, year over year over year, to drive the name and to drive us as being a differentiated resource in the market.”