

Mill of the Week: White Oak Mills

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As the Made in USA movement has gained momentum, Cone has become one of the biggest buzzwords in American denim. Talked about by everyone from new denim startups to men's fashion magazines, the White Oak Mills in Greensboro, North Carolina have come to represent quality, heritage and American manufacturing.

Named after a big oak tree, which was used as a landmark for surveying, White Oak has become an institution as one of the last American denim mills in continuous operation since 1905.

When White Oak began making denim, it was still used primarily as a workwear fabric for mill workers or farmers. Kara Nicholas, vice president product design and marketing, said, "At the end of the day, the fabrics needed to be strong, built to last, people were interested in fabrics that kept their color."

Today, White Oak continues to preserve the quality of fabrics. The mill makes selvedge denim in the same way it was made at the beginning of the 20th century with vintage American Draper X3 looms on the original wood flooring. Nicholas said that the story of the mill is woven into the fabric—the original wood floor gives dimension and depth to the fabrics. "It's not a perfect fabric but the beauty is in the imperfections," she said.

Brands have been hungry for the quality and authenticity of Cone's product, and it's used across categories from niche raw denim brands to Levi's. To meet this need, Cone recently opened a web store selling smaller quantities of selvedge denim and shirting fabrics. They offer fabrics that have low or no minimum order requirements to facilitate working with smaller brands.



For A/W 2017-2018, Cone is introducing a new, sustainable heritage story as they showcase a natural indigo collection. The mill will also introduce black-on-black selvedge and vintage-looking fabrics with stretch incorporated for comfort.

Though an important aspect of White Oak's branding is its heritage, the mill must also focus on newer innovations in the sphere. "We really feel like we wear

two hats," Nicholas said. "We've noticed that comfort has been resonating with both men and women, and we've been trying to take that to another level."



S-gene technology features a core spun stretch yarn that enhances the performance of the fabric by adding more than one core. In addition, the mill has been working with outdoor brands on moisture-repellent, anti-microbial, cooling technologies and strength.

Brands that have moved through trends in jeans can attest to the mill's versatility. Volcom has partnered with Cone for the last 20 years and has worked with the mill on everything from rigid styles to performance denim. James Gonzales, global denim and pants senior designer, said that Cone sets itself apart with "heritage, tradition, and the experience to push forward with technology to modernize what we need out of denims for our lifestyle."

Like many other mills, White Oak is now trying to reach the consumer, taking advantage of the customers' current desire to know about the production of the clothes they wear. The mill is uniquely well positioned because of its long history and the cachet that Made in USA currently holds.

Cone Mill got an early start on advertising to the end consumer in the 1930s through publications like the Progressive Farmer and Country Gentleman when the mill developed Deeptone, a denim with a richer color. At that time, Cone worked with brands like Stonewall and Big Winston on cobranding on the label to convey quality.



In celebration of the 100-year anniversary of White Oak, the mill once again began producing the labels and the hangtags for their selvedge goods, natural indigo and S-gene stretch technology.

The tags indicate the quality of the fabric and the way it is constructed. The consumer has in turn come to understand that the construction of the cotton in turn speaks to the lifestyle of the mill, Nicholas said, "We say we're not just a mill, we're really passionate about what we do."