

Textiles, Teachers, and Troops

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA 1880-1945

A Brief Survey of the Textile Mill Companies in Greensboro, 1890-1946

by Megan Coker, UNCG 2014

Ever since the Mount Hecla Steam Cotton Mill opened in 1833, the textile industry has been a vital part of Greensboro. While the Mount Hecla Mill moved to Gaston County by the 1850s, from the 1890s on Greensboro attracted such textile companies as the Cone Mills Corporation, Blue Bell Incorporated, Burlington Industries Incorporated, J.P. Stevens and Company, the Mock, Judson, Voehringer Company of North Carolina (also known by the trade name of "Mojud"), and Guilford Mills, all of which have made significant contributions to Greensboro's landscape and heritage.

The Cone Mills Corporation

The Cone family's first foray into the textile industry was when Moses and Ceasar Cone invested \$50,000 in the C.E. Graham Manufacturing Company located in Asheville, North Carolina. They went on to form the Cone Export and Commission Company in 1890 to sell cloth through contracts with Southern mills. In 1892 the Cones established the Southern Finishing and Warehouse Company, the first finishing plant in the South; in 1893 they took over the C.E. Graham Manufacturing Company and relocated their primary offices to Greensboro to take advantage of the area's cotton fields, gins, warehouses, and railroads. The Cones then established a denim mill in Greensboro, called Proximity Mill for its nearness to Piedmont cotton fields, in 1896. Business boomed, and in 1898 the Cones persuaded their long-time friends Emanuel and Herman Sternberger to come to Greensboro and build their cotton flannel factory, dubbed Revolution Mill. Moses and Ceasar's brothers (Solomon, Julius, Bernard, Clarence, and Frederick) soon joined them in further developing their textile empire. The largest of the Cone plants, White Oak Cotton Mills, was opened in the first few years of the new century. When printed fabric became popular around 1912 the Proximity Print Works was established with J.E. Harden and H.A. Barnes as manager and overseer, respectively. The

Cones continued to expand, with major renovation projects and the acquisition of several more mills in the Greensboro area. By the 1930s the Cones had begun to diversify into a larger variety of fabrics and Revolution Mill was the largest exclusive producer of flannel in the world. The company's war efforts during World War II earned the Army-Navy 'E' award for high achievement in production. In 1945 all of the mills were united under the moniker of Proximity Manufacturing Company, which was then changed in a 1948 corporate merger to the more familiar name of the Cone Mills Corporation.

During the 1950s the Cone Mills Corporation was the world's largest manufacturer of denims and cotton flannels, and continued to acquire new mills and diversify its product lines. As the domestic textile industry went into a state of decline during the last decades of the twentieth century, the Cone Mills Corporation struggled even as it remained the largest producer of denim in the world. The company was acquired by W.L. Ross & Company in 2004, and since then has been in operation as the Cone Denim division of the [International Textile Group](#). The flagship and primary headquarters of Cone Denim to this day is the White Oak mill in Greensboro.

Blue Bell Incorporated

In 1904, C.C. Hudson and his associates began making and selling overalls in Greensboro under the trade name of Hudson Overall Company. The company grew with the booming textile industry and by 1919 had changed its name to Blue Bell Overall Company and moved into a new, larger workspace on South Elm Street. Blue Bell merged with the Big Ben Manufacturing Company of Kentucky and Tennessee in 1926. The combined companies continued to operate under Blue Bell's name and kept the executive offices in Greensboro. In 1936 Blue Bell announced the purchase of the Globe Superior Corporation. With plants in multiple states as well as such innovative practices as the first sanforized or pre-shrunk garments, a wider availability of proportional fits per size, and new labeling methods designed to benefit consumers, this new branch of the company greatly improved Blue Bell's corporate and manufacturing capabilities. During this expansion the company renamed itself

the Blue Bell-Globe Manufacturing Company. The company continued to grow in 1943 with the addition of the Casey Jones Company (which included what was up to that point rarely-used Wrangler brand of clothing), and changed its name again to Blue Bell Incorporated.

Blue Bell continued to grow after World War II, introducing Wrangler western-style jeans in 1947. By 1955 the Blue Bell's many plants had an annual production rate of 36,000,000 individual garments for men, women, and children. A new, three-story building for the company's executive offices was built on Church Street in 1958. Wranglers became an international product in 1961, and in 1966 the cover of Newsweek magazine featured a girl wearing Wranglers. Blue Bell diversified its production portfolio with the acquisition of the J.W. Carter Shoe Company in 1967 to make boots. In 1970 Blue Bell founded two new divisions of the Wranglers brand, Lady Wranglers and Mr. Wrangler, and the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association endorsed Wranglers in 1974. Wrangler Kids was started in 1975, Blue Bell continued to grow with the acquisition of sportswear manufacturer Jantzen Incorporated in 1980, and country singer Willie Nelson became Wrangler's official spokesman in 1985. In 1986, Blue Bell Corporation was sold to the VF Corporation. Within days of its acquisition, VF Corporation announced it was closing the Blue Bell offices in Greensboro. However, in 1998 VF relocated its own headquarters from Pennsylvania to Greensboro. In spite of numerous personnel cutbacks through corporate restructuring and recent economic downturns, the VF Corporation maintains its primary offices in Greensboro, with a reported 869 employees working there as of March 2013.

Burlington Industries Incorporated

In 1923 The Burlington Mills Corporation was founded in Burlington, North Carolina, under the leadership of J. Spencer Love. To differentiate their products from those of their competitors Burlington used new synthetic fibers, including rayon, then known as "artificial silk." By 1933 Burlington Mills employed 4,000 workers and produced 60 million yards of fabric, becoming the world's largest producer of rayon fabric in the United States during 1934.

Burlington Mills moved its executive offices to Greensboro in 1935, where they remain to this day. Burlington entered the world of hosiery production in 1938. From 1942-1945, the corporation produced items for the military, and became a leader in producing parachutes from the new synthetic fiber nylon.

In 1952 Burlington acquired the property and assets of the Sarfet Hosiery Company and became the first textile company to advertise on network television. By 1955, when the corporation changed its name to Burlington Industries, the company employed 45,000 people and annual sales figures reached \$500,000,00. In 1962 the company became the first textile company to reach \$1 billion in annual sales, and continued to grow throughout the next decades, until the textile industry's downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite some highlights, such as subsidiary Nano Tex's stain repellent fabric being named one of the top innovations of 2000 by Time Magazine, the company went through several turbulent periods until it was bought by W.L. Ross & Company in 2003. Ross announced in 2004 the merger of Burlington Industries with its other large textile subsidiary, Cone Mills, resulting in the [International Textile Group](#). The Burlington Industries division of ITG maintains its executive offices in Greensboro.

J.P. Stevens and Company

In 1937 North Carolina residents Wilbert J. and Harry C. Carter established the Carter Fabrics Corporation in Greensboro. The Carters' specialty was synthetic materials, including fabric made of rayon, rayon and wool, & rayon and nylon. They engaged the large textile corporation J.P. Stevens and Company as their selling agents; Stevens officials were impressed with the Carters' materials, and in 1946 the Carter Fabric Corporation merged into the J.P. Stevens network. As one of the largest companies in the textile industry, with plants and offices across several states, J.P. Stevens and Company operated through a regional sub-management scheme. When the Carter Fabrics Corporation joined J.P. Stevens and Company, Wilbert and Harry Carter became company officers. The Carters continued to lead the J.P.

Stevens and Company southeastern states' synthetic division, known as the Carter Operating Group, in their administrative headquarters located in Greensboro.

The Mock, Judson, Voehringer Company of North Carolina ("Mojud")

Bernard L. Mock and Nathaniel Judson formed Mock & Judson Incorporated in 1919. John K. Voehringer joined them in 1926, prompting a name change to the Mock, Judson, Voehringer Company of North Carolina Incorporated. While the company commonly referred to by its trade name of "Mojud" was a latecomer to the booming textile industry in Greensboro, by 1929 its annual production rate was over four million pairs of silk hosiery. In spite of the Great Depression, Mojud was able to expand its mill in 1930, 1936, and 1938, including such services as a cafeteria and an on-site nurse. By the late 1930s Mojud had transitioned from silk to nylon hosiery. Mojud continued to expand and innovate, becoming the first firm to install picot top and heel attachments, the first company in the South to knit chiffon hosiery, and was among the first hosieries to use the method and machinery which enabled an entire hose to be knitted from top to toe in one continuous interlocking thread. However, Mojud was also involved in the labor and union disputes which ran throughout the textile industry during this time period. During World War II, when all available silk and nylon was redirected into parachute production, Mojud temporarily switched to making rayon hosiery.

After the war, Mojud continued to grow and remained a major player in the textile industry. By 1947 Mojud was a major employer within Greensboro, with more than 2,000 people working in the Greensboro facility and by 1955 they produced more than 19 million pairs of nylon hosiery annually. Mojud enjoyed a widespread market and brand recognition, with nationwide advertisement campaigns featuring such celebrities as Rita Hayworth, Ginger Rogers, and Virginia Mayo, as well as the cupid-like character known as the "Mojud Man" designed by illustrator and cartoonist Vic Herman. Between 1956 and 1957 Mojud was bought by a Burlington hosiery maker, Kayser-Roth, who produced a variety of hosiery brands at the mill until 1972. A portion of the mill building was used as the Rolane Factory Outlet Store until

1999. While it has been left dormant since then, as of 2010 the Mojud mill building was under consideration for registration in the National Register of Historic Places.

Guilford Mills

Guilford Mills was founded by James Hornaday in 1946 in a garage on Sycamore Street, with half a dozen employees and a few knitting machines making synthetic fabrics for ladies' lingerie. The company grew quickly, establishing two knitting plants and a sales office during the 1950s. The next decade brought a further diversification of products, with Guilford Mills expanding their product line. By introducing new finishing techniques to their plants, such as flame laminating, napping, embossing, and coating, Guilford was able to diversify their offerings by supplying their specialization of warp-knit fabric to companies which made a wider variety of apparel and other products, including upholstery, automotive interiors, and luggage. The company became publicly owned in the 1970s, and in 1974 sales exceeded \$100 million. In 1984, Guilford Mills was ranked the top performer among 46 publicly traded textile companies. Throughout the 1980s Guilford continued to grow and expand, acquiring the TRT Corporation, Lumberton Dyeing and Finishing Company, Rouquinet Deroy Limited, Gold Mills Incorporated, FFF Industries Incorporated, and Krislex Knits. In 1988 Guilford Mills officially made the Fortune 500 List, with a 60 percent market share of its primary offering, warp knits. However, the decline of the domestic textile industry began to affect the company. In 1990, Guilford laid off 20 Greensboro employees and closed a 300-worker plant in Augusta, Georgia, as the company experienced its first loss in sales. Guilford seemed to recover in the mid- to late-1990s, but in 2000, the company exported their dyeing and finishing plant to Mexico, closed their Greensboro plant, and phased out their apparel-fabric production, resulting in a loss of over a thousand jobs in Greensboro. Guilford continued to report large losses, until they filed for bankruptcy protection in 2002. The company managed to reorganize, and was then bought by New York-based company Cerberus Capital Management in 2004. Cerberus relocated Guilford Mills to Wilmington, North Carolina, in 2005. Michigan-based company Lear Corporation, a supplier of automotive seating and electrical power

management systems, bought Guilford Mills in 2012, when the company was reportedly enjoying \$400 million in annual sales.

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