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Linda Miller sews jeans at Taylor Togs, which makes pants, skirts, jackets and shirts that sell for hundreds of dollars in exclusive stores.
Charlotte Observer Photos by Jeff Willhelm

Bucking the trend, making fancy jeans

Skilled workers and hand-detailing help factories land contracts

Jen Aronoff, The Charlotte Observer
MICAVILLE - In this Blue Ridge mountain hamlet of little more than a post office and a white-steepled Presbyterian church, the Taylor Togs jeans plant isn't just the largest industry, it's the only industry.

It's also a rarity: an American factory making the quintessential American garment.

Two years ago, Taylor Togs was on the brink of closing. Cheap imports had swept away orders for the basic jeans the plant had cut and sewn for nearly 50 years. Management laid off most workers, many of whom had decades of experience.

But with business referrals from major U.S. fabric maker Cone Denim, a few promising sample orders and a boost from up-and-coming New York design duo Rag & Bone, Taylor Togs decided to try to survive by making premium and vintage-style jeans.

In essence, the company is staking its future on its past. The Micaville factory and a Taylorsville finishing plant that once mass-produced basic jeans for Levi's and Wrangler are using old-fashioned hand-detailing techniques to turn out denim and twill pants, skirts, jackets and shirts that sell for hundreds of dollars in exclusive stores worldwide.

"We manufacture stuff that, 15 years ago, I'd have literally socked you if you'd asked me to make it," said owner Grier Lackey, 65, a self-proclaimed "country boy" from Hiddenite in Alexander County.

The Levi's vintage collection, with its torn, weathered, limited-edition replicas that can sell for $500 and up, comes from Taylor Togs. So did the Gap's Product Red denim line. In recent weeks, plant employees have been working on streamlined Helmut Lang jeans and classic Rag & Bone pants.

In the early 1970s, when Lackey and his then-business partners began making jeans in an old school in Taylorsville, the market was far broader. By Taylor Togs' mid-'90s peak, its plants in Bakersville, Micaville and Taylorsville, in the state's mountains and foothills, employed more than 500 people and were making 60,000 pairs of jeans a week, primarily for Levi's, Lackey said.

But by 2005, the Bakersville plant had closed, and employment was below 300. Levi's had moved production elsewhere, and Mexico, China and other countries exported an increasing amount of jeans. Taylor Togs had only a few small customers remaining and began to shut down.

"I was scared to death," said Sylvia McMahon, 49, a 33-year Micaville employee. Looking for a new job, she said, "wasn't a bit fun. There was nothing to find."

American-made jeans represent only about 3 percent of the domestic denim market, said Gary Raines, an economist with industry group Cotton Inc.

But as overall jeans sales have fallen slightly, sales of premium -- $60 and up -- denim have taken off. Though less than 5 percent of the market, sales of premium jeans grew 230 percent between 2001 and 2006 as True Religion, Seven For All Mankind and other popular brands gained favor.

Making premium jeans

Through its work with Levi's, Taylor Togs already had some experience with premium jeans. So when the company was on the verge of closing, Greensboro denim maker Cone, which had an interest in maintaining a domestic market for its fabric, began to refer business Taylor Togs' way, Lackey said.

Orders from the Gap arrived. So, too, did an inquiry from Rag & Bone, a New York company founded in 2002 that had endured the shutdown of Kentucky Apparel, the first U.S. plant that made its jeans.

"We thought that was very sad," said Rag & Bone co-founder Marcus Wainwright, 32, a native of England, "not just from a personal standpoint, but because they were damn good at what they were doing."

Rag & Bone, which fuses English tailoring with the functionality of American work wear, had decided to make everything it could in the United States, but jean factories were difficult to find. Taylor Togs was one of the few left, and Rag & Bone began working with the plant.

"It's an amazing place," Wainwright said. "Our business would really suffer if it wasn't there."

Rag & Bone's initial volume was too small to keep Taylor Togs afloat, Lackey said. But for workers in Micaville, the order solidified their belief there was a need for what they did, said plant manager Glenda Stewart, a 32-year veteran who had been out of high school less than a week when she began working as a sewing machine operator.

Lackey could easily have shut everything down years ago, workers said. But he decided to make every effort to survive.

Levi's comes calling

Levi's, which returned with orders for its high-end vintage collection, is again Taylor Togs' largest customer. Wainwright also has helped recruit business by recommending the company's work to friends in the fashion industry. Other orders are coming in, Stewart said.

In Micaville, the roar of machines once greeted those walking through the cheery lunchroom to the expansive factory floor, said sewing supervisor Kathy Garland, 50, who began working at the plant at age 16.

Now, the air is calm, with fewer employees -- largely middle-aged women with decades of experience -- performing slower, more complicated work: crooked stitches and hand-sewing, often using narrow, selvage-edged fabric. They sew in the bright, tidy plants trimmed with blue, magenta, turquoise and purple. Old-time machines, such as three hemmers that were only made until the late 1960s, help them create vintage stitches and a handmade look.

Employees say they're up to the challenge. They note that their work is more interesting now because of the variety of patterns, cuts and fabrics they sew. The plant, Garland said, is probably one of only two or three left in the Southeast that can perform such customized work.

"That's what's kept us in business," Lackey said. "The craftsmanship of people in Western North Carolina made us able to adapt to do this type of sewing."

Brands can make more money by producing products in low-cost foreign locales, said Wainwright, who with business partner David Neville won the prestigious Council of Fashion Designers of America award for menswear this year.

"But there's also got to be some romance in clothing, if you ask me," he said. "There's got to be some feeling. You look at a pair of [Taylor Togs] jeans and see someone very skilled has made them. It's important to us, that love and skill and attention to detail that goes into what we make."

To help sustain that craftsmanship, Rag & Bone shares its garments' stories with customers, describing the Micaville factory on cardboard tags and using labels that read "Handmade in N. Carolina."

Wainwright and Neville are wonderful, Garland said. "They really care about their products. They want to learn. [Wainwright] will sit out there and watch the girls sew," she said. "If we're out of work it worries him to death, because he doesn't want us to close."

Taylor Togs officials know what they're facing. The Taylorsville plant is within view of a Wal-Mart Supercenter that sells Mexican- and Asian-made jeans starting at $9.97.

Company still struggles

As the premium denim market, and Rag & Bone, continue to grow, Taylor Togs' business has picked up. The company, which has about 140 employees, has begun hiring. But it's still difficult to make money, company leaders say, because making a small quantity of expensive, labor-intensive jeans -- about 1,000 pairs a week, in a good week -- doesn't bring in as much revenue as high volumes of basic jeans.

Taylor Togs has not made a profit since it restarted, Stewart said, but it's aiming to recruit enough business to do so. "I'm optimistic, as long as we do a good job, there will be work for us," she said. "But it is a struggle."

The enthusiasm of Rag & Bone and other customers, Stewart said, is encouraging in a business she sees dying every day. She frequently receives e-mail messages from Wainwright, including photos of his baby and of Brad Pitt wearing Rag & Bone jeans.

Workers, Stewart said, are glad to know their efforts are appreciated.

"There are very few places in the world that are doing these type products with the prestige and the clout that's behind these labels," Lackey said. "I guess that's what keeps you going is the fact that you ... have a little pride in what you do. I wish there was more profit in it. I like profit and pride -- both P's are good."

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