

What does the closure of the US's last-surviving selvedge mill at the start of 2018 say about the wider textile industry there? Shari Shallard reports.



When they couldn't salvage the selvedge

Just after Christmas (timed so that employees could get their paycheques through the holidays), a denim factory in Greensboro, North Carolina, closed its doors for good. Factory closures are almost always bad news for a subset of people; the company's numbers aren't matching up and, at the very least, the surrounding town is likely to be left with large numbers of people suddenly out of a job.

But the closing of Cone Denim's White Oak plant resonated far beyond the accountants at Cone and the residents of Greensboro. Headlines referred to the closure as "surprising and saddening," "a gut punch," and "a national

tragedy." What was so special about the White Oak plant? And why are people trying to divine truths about American heritage and the country's modern day textile industry from this singular event? Answering both of these requires first understanding the long and rich — and somewhat politically charged — history of this 112-year-old denim factory.

The story of Cone Denim

Cone Denim's White Oak plant opened in 1905, covering more than a million square-feet. The mill has been celebrated through the years, not just for its age and size, but for its storied history — built on America's working-

Made in America. A US flag is sewn into all Todd Shelton jeans.

Todd Shelton



1940s photo of selvedge denim shuttle looms, taken from only halfway across the vast room.

ConeDenim on Instagram

class need for denim, elevated by a famous "Golden Handshake," and ultimately brought down by trade policies, cheaper competition and acquisitions.

Most notably, though, the White Oak plant was known for being the last selvedge denim mill in the United States. Selvedge, so named because of the "self edge" of the fabric, is revered for its quality, achieved with complex and meticulous machinery that is largely incompatible with the high-output demands of today's clothing economy. Cone's White Oak selvedge denims were woven on American Draper X3 fly shuttle looms that date back to the 1940s.

Denim woven on the vintage looms has a distinct depth and dimension. Even the process sounds poetic: looms sit on turn-of-the-century wooden floors, which, by Cone's description, "creates a rhythm and motion that is uniquely woven into these fabrics". A small bobbin of yarn inside a shuttle travels back and forth across the loom; because the yarn isn't cut after each weft insertion, the edge cannot unravel, allowing it to maintain its integrity throughout the life of the garment.

The quality of, and affection for, Cone Denim's products have never been called into question, so why did White Oak close down?

Well, its closure, though heartbreaking to many who saw the plant as a beacon of American heritage and a symbol that people were still willing to pay more money for a higher-quality, smaller-batch product, was not entirely surprising. The plant had been operating at a loss for years, despite supplementing its selvedge products with other quicker, more profitable offerings. To many, the death knell

had rung a year before when Cone's parent company was sold to a private equity firm. But let's back up for a moment.

David Shuck, managing editor of the online clothing and accessories website heddels.com, dives deep into Cone's history in his eloquent article "Who Killed the Cone Mills White Oak Plant" (February 2018). It is a timeline too complex to adequately capture here, but here is a brief overview of a story Mr Shuck tells:

In the late 1800s, Moses and Ceasar Cone began opening mills in Greensboro to turn cotton into fabric. "Ceasar Cone thought that cotton denim, the sturdy American work cloth, would be in constant demand in a rapidly developing country so the indigo blue twill became the focus of their production," writes Shuck. He was right. They soon had seven facilities, including White Oak, and in 1915



The White Oak plant has been selling off pieces of history, like these selvedge loom wooden shuttles which are already out of stock.

White Oak Shop

entered the "Golden Handshake" with Levi Strauss & Co. — whereby White Oak was designated the exclusive manufacturer of the denim for 501 jeans. The company, then called Proximity, became a major producer of fabrics for both World Wars, and managed to survive the Great Depression in between.

In 1948, Proximity became Cone Mills Corporation; three years later it went public and thrived through the next few decades. In 1983, Cone was the target of a hostile takeover and resisted by going private again. Alas, the 1980s marked an onslaught of new competition from Japan — good quality clothing at lower prices — and Cone began closing down facilities. The nineties brought NAFTA and 2005 brought the end to various import protections, all of which hit Cone hard. Cone Mills filed for bankruptcy.

Billionaire investor Wilbur Ross bought Cone Mills, rolling it and other manufacturers into the International Textile Group. Profits were not what he had hoped for and Ross sold ITG to Platinum Equity in 2016; a year later the closure was announced.



As seen on these Todd Shelton jeans, the finished edges of the outseam (visible when cuffed) are distinct to selvedge denim.

Todd Shelton

The bottom line

Cone's director of corporate communications, Delores Sides, affirms that certain forces simply could not be overcome. "Changes in market demand had significantly reduced order volume at the facility as customers have transitioned more of their fabric sourcing outside the US," she tells WSA. "Despite tremendous efforts on the part of the plant staff and all employees to manage these changes, the plant's large size provided much more capacity than was needed and that could be operated going forward."

Nonetheless, many had hoped the equity firm would have found reason to maintain the plant. "Even if it was no longer profitable, there was a great deal of brand value in having something so historically significant at the centre of Cone's operation," Shuck writes. "The new ownership at Platinum, however, must not have seen it as enough [to keep] the doors open, and their track record shows no evidence of sentimentality."

Consumers do feel sentimental, though. Relics and reminders of the plant are for sale on the online White Oak Shop. At the time of writing, authentic White Oak quill bobbins — some with thread still attached, some without — were still for sale, though the authentic Selvedge Loom Wooden Shuttles ("Add a little piece of White Oak history to your home," the blurb says) from vintage Draper X3 looms had gone out of stock.

It's in their jeans

With mills in Mexico and China, Ms Sides says Cone Denim continues to offer performance, stretch, selvedge and natural indigo denims crafted out of the company's 3D R&D incubator.

But many consumers are looking not just for the technology, but the heritage of selvedge — the intimacy and personal attention of small batch, the tradition of jeans made in an American facility. Perhaps the gaping space left by the closure of White Oak will be filled not by another giant mill, but by a number of smaller, innovative purveyors of selvedge denim.

Consider Huston Textile Company, a family-owned business based in Mather, California. In autumn 2012, Huston began producing small-batch cloth, using US-sourced raw materials and vintage American-made machines. Specialising in selvedge denim, chambray, gingham, plaid, and tweed, Huston's equipment includes a 1962 Draper X3 loom, a 1968 Draper X3 loom, and a 1921 Crompton & Knowles woollen loom — as well as a 1950 pinless dressing reel, a 1952 beamer and a 1948-1952 automatic filling bobbin winder.

Founder Ryan Huston refers to the work of finding and restoring these classic models as a labour of love, and his mission is steeped in protecting the country's textile heritage. "We are proud to be part of the resurgence of domestic American textiles," he writes on the company's website, describing a journey toward creating "... a truly high-quality American-made product reminiscent of the golden age of textiles".

On the other side of the country, just outside of New York City, Todd Shelton, founder of the Todd Shelton brand, also speaks reverentially about a thoughtful, smaller approach to design and production. In fact, Mr Shelton was not particularly surprised by the closing of the White Oak plant, but not quite for the reasons others

have cited.

"In my dealings with Cone Denim, I didn't see a company that was dedicated to service," he tells WSA. "Cone's parent company is massive, profit- and growth-focused. I couldn't see them being dedicated to a niche, artisan mill like White Oak."

Selvedge jeans are, of course, a natural fit for Todd Shelton. Mr Shelton praises the selvedge weaving technique — describing its tighter, denser weave that gives the denim a sturdier hand — as well as the Japanese mills from which he sources his selvedge. "The Japanese are the world's greatest denim makers," he says. "In mills, we look for quality, a commitment to upholding labour and environmental standards, and a culture of excellent service."

Though the fabric is imported, the work of making selvedge jeans (along with the brand's other offerings of stylish core wardrobe pieces and classic garments designed for long-term wear, made primarily with US-sourced fabrics) is done in-house. "Innovation happens on factory floors," Mr Shelton says. "I believe companies that dedicate themselves to manufacturing their own product display a higher ambition for their product and customers."

This philosophy is behind Mr Shelton's decision in 2011 to halt all branding and sales efforts on existing products and begin work on the company's own factory. Today, the Todd Shelton brand is the only clothing company Mr Shelton knows of that manufactures exclusively in-house and sells exclusively direct-to-consumer. "Our factory is the engine for all that we are able to offer customers in terms of a differentiated product," he says.

Redefining US textiles

Despite the closure of the country's oldest, biggest and only remaining selvedge denim mill, the US National Council of Textile Organizations seems to feel the US textile industry is doing just fine. At the annual meeting in March, outgoing chairman William McCrary Jr gave a state-of-the-industry overview, which included stats about 2017 like these:

- US employment in the textile supply chain: 550,500
- Value of shipments for US textiles and apparel: \$77.9 billion
- US exports of fibre, textiles and apparel: \$28.6 billion

Further, according to NCTO, US textile mills have increased labour productivity by 60% since 2000, and the industry invested \$20 billion in new plants and equipment from 2006 to 2016. The US is today developing next generation textile materials such as conductive fabric with antistatic properties, electronic textiles to monitor heart rate and other vital signs, antimicrobial fibres, lifesaving body armour, and new fabrics that adapt to the climate.

Absent from these lists are any mention of the White Oak closure or even any figures regarding denim, even though jeans were once synonymous with US textiles. Nevertheless, it is easy to think that they were talking about White Oak, Todd Shelton and Huston Textile Company when NCTO wrote its We Make Amazing manifesto, which includes the sentence: "The metamorphosis of yesterday's mills into today's centres for creative and technical solutions touches our lives in more ways than you can imagine."

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