



Socks from Paul Bryan USA carry on a family legacy that began with Russell Hosiery Mills (pictured, left, in 1966), which operated in Montgomery County for nearly 50 years.

Heart & SOLES

The unsung heroes of our wardrobes and our history, socks — and the hosiery mills that make them — represent a way of life that once knit together generations of North Carolinians.

written by MARK KEMP



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ON WEEKENDS WHEN Paul Sullivan was a boy, his dad would cart him over to Russell Hosiery Mills, a sprawling campus of industrial buildings in the tiny town of Star. The main part of the mill was an old trade school building that Sullivan's grandfather J. Paul Russell had converted into a hosiery factory in 1941. It was the ultimate playground for a little kid: 187,000 square feet of scuffed-up wooden and nicked cement floors with row upon row of knitting machines that whirred and hissed like a thousand air-conditioning units blowing at once.



Eighty years after J. Paul Russell founded Russell Hosiery Mills in 1939, his grandson Paul Sullivan (bottom) started his own sock company, Paul Bryan USA, with his friend Bryan Bolick.



When his grandfather was there, the younger Paul would follow him like a duckling, pushing big carts of socks from station to station as “Daddy Paul” made small talk with the knitters and the sewers and the folders and the packers.

“My grandfather knew everybody in that mill,” Sullivan says. “It was impressive to me, even as a kid, that he could remember the names of all his employees.”

In its heyday, Russell Hosiery was the largest employer in Montgomery County and one of the top sock manufacturers in the United States, with 800 workers, a headquarters in Star, and a regional office in the Empire State Building. But what seemed like a forever industry wouldn't last. By the time Russell Hosiery sold to Fruit of the Loom in 1986, the textile industry in North Carolina was already in decline. The following decade would see major turbulence with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which loosened trade restrictions between the United States, Canada, and Mexico, ultimately prompting mills to move abroad in search of cheaper labor.

Russell retired to focus on real estate development. His former factory soldiered on for another 15 years under different ownership, but by 2001, the mill, by then part of the Mount Airy-based Renfro Corporation, had gone dark, its machines permanently silenced. Today, the old Russell building houses the STARworks arts center, but it seems that the ghosts of hosiery mill workers past are still there, knitting and sewing and folding and packing.

IN THE 132 YEARS SINCE NORTH CAROLINA'S FIRST hosiery mill opened in Charlotte, the factories have



If you grew up in the Piedmont, chances are good that someone in your family — your mom or dad, your siblings or cousins — worked in a hosiery mill.

enriched the families who own them and put food on the tables of those who toil in them. Hosiery mills were part of the late 19th-century textile boom that created entire mill communities mostly across the Piedmont, bringing the state from its purely agrarian origins to national prominence as a manufacturing powerhouse.

By 1953, North Carolina led the nation in hosiery production. That year, the state's 425 hosiery mills employed more than 50,000 workers

in 56 counties, producing more than 40 percent of all hosiery made in the United States. If you grew up in the Piedmont in the half-century prior to the mid-'90s, chances are good that someone in your family — your grandfather or grandmother, your mom or dad, your aunts or uncles, your siblings or cousins — worked in a hosiery mill.

About an hour northeast of Star, on the banks of the Haw River in Alamance County, sits a village that looks much the same today as it did more than

Clockwise from left: A customer in 1940s Raleigh could shop for stockings finished by a looper working not 60 miles away at Burlington Mills. By 1960, she could buy pantyhose, a product pioneered by Glen Raven Mills in Alamance County.

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a century ago. Mill houses and bungalows cluster around a three-story, red-brick, Italianate-style factory built in 1880. Surrounding the main plant is a complex of other structures, including cotton warehouses, a picker house, a dye house, two water towers, and an office and company store.

Glencoe Mill Village is one of the few fully preserved mill communities remaining in North Carolina. Step inside the old company store nowadays, though, and instead of shelves filled with groceries for residents who once worked at Glencoe Mill, you'll find the Textile Heritage Museum, a repository of antique looms, glass cases filled with yellowing fabrics, and an old Scott & Williams knitting machine that *rat-a-tat-tats* like an electric typewriter, still capable of churning out hosiery.

You'll also find the museum's executive director, Alamance County Historic Properties Superintendent John Guss, who's passionate about preserving our state's textile history in a time when most of the big mills have closed or moved abroad. Guss worries that old textile mills, unlike

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Civil War forts or World War II battleships, may be taken for granted and overlooked for public funding as historic sites. He and historian Mac Whatley — who's raising money to open a larger facility, the North Carolina Textile Museum, in two Randolph County mills — believe it's important that North Carolinians understand and care about our state's industrial past.

When it comes to hosiery and other textiles, that past is filled with fascinating tales of family success stories, close-knit mill communities, worker rebellions, and innovation. When George Knight was a child, his family moved to a textile community about five miles southwest of Glencoe Village near Glen Raven Mills, where his father got a job. Knight worked at Glen Raven and Burlington

On the outskirts of Burlington — once known as the Hosiery Capital of the Nation — Glencoe Mill Village preserves buildings that supported the local cotton mill, which closed in 1954.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES HARRIS



“We’ve lost that old mill culture. We lost all that stuff that our ancestors knew how to do by hand.”

Industries, and then around 1964, he followed in his dad’s footsteps, landing a job as a loom fixer at Copland Industries, just southeast of Glencoe. By the time he retired three decades later, Knight had climbed the ladder to supervisor — but had given up the role because he preferred making sure that the 96 looms he oversaw were in good working order and teaching others how to do the job.

“I loved the challenge,” he says. “I’d patrol them looms, make sure that they were weaving correctly, that there weren’t any defects in the cloth and so forth. And when one of ’em stopped due to an end breakage or something like that, well, I’d start it back running.”

Now 91, Knight mourns the passing of the sense of community he once felt in the village. “We’ve lost that old mill culture. Technology has took over,” he says. “We lost all that stuff that our ancestors knew how to do — the stuff that we used to do by hand. Used to, I had to sit down and figure out what was wrong with a loom. Well, now, they got computers to do most of that. The craft has gone away.”

THE CRAFT OF KNITTING HOSIERY IN NORTH CAROLINA

began when Charlotte native R.M. Oates Jr., who’d grown up in his father’s textile mill, traveled to the Northeast to learn about the then-new technology of hosiery manufacturing. When he returned home in 1890, he opened the state’s first hosiery mill, Gold Crown, with 12 knitting machines. Oates, *The News & Observer* reported five years later, had “caught inspiration from the music of machinery in early boyhood in his father’s factory ... It was the panting engine, the revolving wheels, the busy machine that to him was most charming and inviting.”

Hosiery manufacturing turned out to be a game-changer for the state’s budding textile industry due to its use of smaller machines that were easier for workers to operate than the giant spinning frames and carding machines used to produce other fabrics.

“After Oates became successful doing this, suddenly other people were saying, *Wow, I need to get on the bandwagon,*” Whatley says. “All of a sudden, a hosiery mill opened in Valdese in 1892, and then another one opened in Mount Airy, and then mills popped up in Randleman and Asheboro.”

The Durham Hosiery Company arrived in the Triangle in 1894, followed by High Point Hosiery (later Adams-Millis) at the turn of the century. By 1930, Adams-Millis was one of the largest hosiery mills in the country, with 2,000 workers knitting 65 million pairs of stockings a year.

In Burlington, the Textile Heritage Museum displays the antique devices at which North Carolina mill workers once spent their shifts, including a loom (left) and a Scott & Williams knitting machine.



To learn more about North Carolina’s textile tradition — and the Textile Heritage Museum — watch the first installment of our NC Icons video series at ourstate.com/ncicons.

It was around that time that a 16-year-old Paul Russell got a job at Slane Hosiery Mills in High Point and then spent the next decade working as a traveling salesman. With the money he earned on the road, he returned home and opened Russell Hosiery Mills. By the 1960s, Russell was a major mover and shaker in the industry, traveling back and forth between Montgomery County and New York City, wining and dining potential clients.

One of Paul Sullivan's favorite stories about his grandfather involves a snowy night at a fancy Manhattan restaurant in 1962. Over Scotch and cigars, Russell was hard-selling some bigwigs from a national department store chain. He wanted them to buy his socks. But they weren't biting. Just then, a man bumped into their table. When he looked down to apologize, the man recognized the Montgomery County textile magnate. "Oh my God, Paul Russell!" the man exclaimed. Russell looked up. "Well, hey there, Andy. Sit down and join us."

Andy Griffith, star of the biggest TV show of the period, slid in and joined the conversation. "Listen," he told Russell's clients, "if you're going to get socks, you've got to get them from this guy. He gave them to us on the set of *The Andy Griffith Show*, and

they're mighty good socks." That important connection sealed the deal, and within weeks, Russell was shipping socks to the client's stores across the U.S.

Paul Sullivan laughs as he tells the story. "But here's the clincher," he says. "My grandfather set the whole thing up." Turns out that Russell and Griffith had planned this "chance" encounter. "He told me, 'I knew that this would be a tough sale, and I knew that there was no way they were going to turn down one of the biggest stars of the '60s.'"

DESPITE HIS FAMILY'S HISTORY, THE LAST THING THAT Paul Sullivan wanted to do in life was work in hosiery. He graduated from high school in 1993, the year before NAFTA went into effect. Although his father, William Sullivan, had started a smaller hosiery operation, Russell Fashion Foot, after his grandfather sold Russell Hosiery Mills, the younger Sullivan saw no future in the industry.

"As a teenager, you're just thinking, *This is the most uncool thing you could possibly do,*" he says with a laugh. And yet here he is, three decades later, after a long career in radio, back inside a hosiery mill, continuing the family's legacy with his three-year-old sock company, Paul Bryan USA.

Sure enough, as fate would have it, Paul Sullivan — just like his father and his grandfather before him — is now in the hosiery business.

Over the steady hiss of knitting machines churning out Paul Bryan USA's Pink Ribbon line of socks, Sullivan and his partner, Bryan Bolick, chat with the owner of Graham Dyeing & Finishing, the small mill in Burlington that manufactures their products. The mill's knitting manager, Edward Harrell, holds up a pair of socks that have just been deposited into a plastic bin. He explains that it takes only 127 seconds for each machine to make one Paul Bryan sock. It would have taken at least 45 minutes to make one on the machines in R.M. Oates's factory.

Harrell points inside the knitting machine's cylinder to a web of pink and white threads. This part of the apparatus hasn't changed much from the old knitting machine back at the Textile Heritage Museum, but the technology involved is galaxies beyond that of the vintage equipment. Harrell feeds the design information into a computer in an office at the edge of the mill floor, and the machines make exact replicas of what Sullivan and Bolick have envisioned.

Sullivan is surprised by how fascinated he's become with sock manufacturing in his adulthood. When he was a kid tagging along at his family's old mill in Star, he had no clue of the skills and mastery of the designers and the machine operators, of the intricacies of the process. He had no concept of the generations of people who labored in the factories; back then, he didn't know their names like his grandfather did, but today, as he walks the floor of Graham Dyeing & Finishing to the music of the machinery, Sullivan nods and speaks to workers in every department, from the knitters and the sewers to the folders and the packers.

For more than 80 years, his family has been responsible for making a simple article of clothing that we put on our feet every day. Today, he couldn't be prouder. **Os**

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