

The finishing line for the world's jeans

How a country boy, his devoted employees and their electric cooperative kept textile plants thriving at home

Text and photos by David Icenhour

The 33,000 people in Alexander County put their pants on just like everybody else does. The only difference is they have millions of pairs of pants.

Thanks to a homegrown company, Taylor Togs, the county seat of Taylorsville is the site of the Levi Strauss Company's largest domestic producer of jeans. In a year's time, some 1.5 million pairs of jeans pass through one of the world's most modern jeans finishing plants on their way to retail outlets across the nation and the world.

Incorporated in 1971, Taylor Togs began producing jeans in an old schoolhouse, and their first production line included about 20 people who produced jeans under the "Anvil" brand as well as the Taylor Togs line of jeans. In the past 31 years, owner Grier Lackey, a self-professed "country boy," has watched the company grow to three facilities with some 400 employees.

Taylor Togs also has production facilities in the North Carolina towns of Micaville and Bakersville. The Taylorsville facility operates under the name Apparel Technologies and is the finishing plant where jeans make their final production stop. Here, jeans are washed and given that all-important worn look, which today's fashion demands.

In addition to Levi Strauss, the company has produced jeans for Wrangler, Calvin Klein, Vanity Fair, Abercrombie & Fitch, Bob Timberlake, and a long list of other clothing companies. A current line of Levi "Vintage" jeans are produced with a serial number for



Taylor Togs employee David Farthing uses an air-driven tool to fray the edges of jean pockets for that worn-out look.

each pair, and because only 500 pairs are made in two styles, the jeans sell in high fashion stores for between \$2,000 and \$4,000 a pair. Not bad for a "country boy."

While it's impressive that a small company in a small town has grown to see revenues of around \$15 million per year, it's even more impressive that the company is still going strong in an area where apparel manufacturing has largely moved offshore, taking thousands of jobs along for the ride.

"We've been very fortunate," Lackey said as we talked one Saturday morning in his Taylorsville facility. "We have continued to be innovative, and we are the last of a dying breed of U.S.-based clothing manufacturers. We have survived by having the flexibility to take on specialty products, by being able to quickly fill in the gap when there's a shortage of a product on the retail

shelves, and by specializing in style and fashion. Bulk manufacturing is less expensive out of the country, but they can't offer the service that we can."

The electric cooperative boost

A large part of the special service that Lackey beams about is the finishing plant in Taylorsville, which may be the most modern such facility in the country and possibly the world. Its creation was assisted by the cooperative Crescent Electric Membership Corporation, now known as



EnergyUnited since its merger with Davidson Electric Membership Corporation in 1998. In 1996, Crescent Electric applied for and received a \$325,000 no-interest loan from the Rural Business and Cooperative Development Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That loan for Apparel Technologies was combined with a \$75,000 no-interest loan from the electric cooperative itself. Lackey says that loan was an important key in planning the facility.

"We were planning a \$2 million facility and were looking for funding," he noted. "That

loan helped us build a bigger, more modern facility that provided more jobs than we would have been able to without the loan. The loan was very important to the company and to the town because the additional jobs we created helped the town receive a grant to upgrade the sewer system. The upgraded sewer system allowed the town to accept more business, which added more jobs for residents of the town and county. So, the loan really created a positive cycle."

How today's jeans are finished

The finishing facility is the crown jewel in the company's production process. In today's world, a pair of jeans is not a pair of jeans until it has that pre-washed feel and look. It's a lot more complicated than it sounds and, in fact, Lackey refers to the process as "artistic."

"People don't want the rigid jeans that we produced



Taylor Togs owner Grier Lackey displays jeans material with intricate designs etched by a laser machine. Laser designs are virtually unlimited.

in 1971," he said with a smile. "They want jeans that look like they're about worn out."

That worn look doesn't come by accident. The process to produce wear patterns on jeans is a science, and the Apparel Technologies plant includes a laboratory for testing the effects of the many chemicals used on the fabrics. Jeans are placed in giant washing machines, 200 pairs at a time, in a "recipe" of chemicals and rocks, which soften the materials and give them a "used" look.

"We consider laundry as an art," Lackey said seriously as he leaned against one of the behemoth machines. "If you're not careful, jeans can go in, but rags come out."

Wear patterns are very specific and to get the desired results, sandblasting and hand sanding has been an industry-wide process.

In the Taylorsville finishing plant, sandblasting and hand sanding have given way to high-tech lasers of the same variety a physician might use to zap a cancer cell.

In March of this year, Apparel Technologies installed two prototype laser machines, which have a cost of \$1 million each. The lasers are produced by a company called Technoblast of Cleveland, Ohio. Lackey's company is

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operating the lasers on a royalty basis and is helping to work the bugs out of the new system. Eating about \$1,500 in electric costs each month, the lasers make up for that expense in speed and versatility.

“These are the only two machines of this kind in the world,” Lackey said. “The lasers will set new standards with the designs that can be created. We can do in 28 seconds what it takes several minutes to do with sand blasting and hand sanding. When you’re talking about 1.5 million pairs of jeans, that’s a lot of time saved, not to mention a more stylish design. The lasers are used to “antique” the fabric or give the jeans a moth-eaten look. There’s no limit to the designs that can be created using the lasers. This is the most innovative, modern finishing facility in the country and maybe the world.”

Technology is not confined to the Taylorsville facility. Sewing jeans is not like your mother used to do. The production facilities in Micaville and Bakersville are equipped with automated, computer-driven sewing machines programmed by computer experts. However, even with the most modern and unique equipment, Lackey stresses his company isn’t successful simply because of technology.

“We made an investment with EnergyUnited in the facility, but the investment in our employees has allowed us to find our niche,” Lackey said. “The labor force and our

management is the key. The people in Alexander, Mitchell and Yancey counties have a great deal of craftsmanship, and have been able to adapt with us. You have to have talented, cooperative people to survive. We’ve been able to offer a reasonable income to employees, and it’s income that people have been able to count on for 30 years.”

EnergyUnited’s Chief Executive Officer R.B. Sloan Jr. noted that the partnership with Taylor Togs is an example of EnergyUnited’s commitment to the community.

“EnergyUnited has a long history of being involved in the communities it serves,” Sloan said. “Assisting Taylor Togs with grant funding and providing a no-interest loan serves as an example of our desire to see communities progress in ways that are beneficial and meaningful to the people who live there. EnergyUnited wants to offer the services that people need, such as electric service, propane service, phone service, Internet service, and many others. However, at the same time, we want to

offer services that improve lives, such as the Bright Ideas grant program to benefit students, and the EnergyUnited Foundation that has given more than \$1 million to those in need. We are involved in education and safety programs, as well as economic stimulus activities. Our focus will continue to be on the communities and the people that we serve.”

While Taylor Togs has survived for 30 years through a combination of creative financing, careful planning, luck and dedication on the part of management and

employees, there is also a basic philosophy which is the cornerstone for Lackey’s success: Believe in what you do and work hard at enjoying your work. Putting in 15-hour days, Lackey says he himself is almost always working.

“Years ago, when I quit a job as manager of a furniture manufacturing company, my Dad said I was crazy,” Lackey recalled with a smile. “I didn’t argue with him, because I thought he might be right. You have to make yourself available for opportunities, and sometimes, things fall into place. I don’t consider anything I do as work. Work is life on a tobacco farm – what I do is fun.”



Above left, Nick Dula uses a computer screen to enter commands for one of Taylor Tog's \$1 million laser machines while, below, owner Grier Lackey examines the results.

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