

Explorations / Vintage talent

THE ART



OF DENIM



A new generation of fashion entrepreneurs are rolling the dice in North Carolina, once the heartland of the USA's rag trade. Their secret weapon? The almost lost skills of garment professionals – now in their 70s and 80s. **Mark Ellwood** takes a lesson from the old timers. Photography by **Peter Hoffman**

In the jeans
From left: Cone Denim jeans at the White Oak plant – America's oldest denim mill; McCall Branson, a cutter at Raleigh Denim

Christel Ellsberg is standing at her desk inside Raleigh Denim's North Carolina factory. The walls of the prefab office are festooned with dozens of brown paper patterns. Quietly proud, she's brandishing a giant binder with a few words written in thick black pen on the cover: 'Official Raleigh Denim Fly Sewing Construction Manual, C.E.' This book is Ellsberg's masterpiece, an eight-year magnum opus filled with instructions and examples for the seamstresses nearby. It gives a detailed outline of how to make the ideal pair of Raleigh Denim jeans. Her dedication to detail is clearly paying off. The factory is at full tilt, its sewing machines whirring constantly. Indeed, it's thanks to Ellsberg's expertise that each pair can bear the same label: 'Handcrafted in North Carolina by non-automated jeansmiths.'

'I started as a custom tailor in Europe,' she explains, in a clipped German accent. 'And if you don't know how to sew – I mean, custom sewing like that – you can't work with patterns.' When Raleigh Denim's cofounder Victor Lytvinenko first shared his prototypes with Ellsberg, she was brutally matter-of-fact. 'I showed her our original patterns, and she chuckled,' he says, standing next to her. 'She said she would never trust a pattern maker under the age of 50 or with less than 25 years' experience.' Now, at 35, slender and mop-haired, Lytvinenko still radiates a boyish enthusiasm. Ellsberg, however, more than meets her own mandate. At 82, she's looks like a *Golden Girls* character but has the skill and expertise of a Savile Row veteran, tailor-made to share a lifetime of know-how with the next generation.

Theirs is an unlikely partnership – the millennial entrepreneur and the 82-year-old German-born seamstress who spent a lifetime patternmaking in factories after emigrating to the USA. Ellsberg exudes an unflappable, determined air. It's easy to imagine the day, eight years ago, when she drove through a rundown district of Raleigh, determined to pitch in after hearing that someone was trying to start a new denim company. She tracked down Lytvinenko and his wife and cofounder, Sarah Yarborough, in the back of a grimy warehouse and insisted they accept her help. Ellsberg worked gratis for six months and, as a team, they built the company, whose stockists now include Nordstrom in the USA, Fenwick in London and Manhattan, and many more around the world.

Lytvinenko readily admits how invaluable Ellsberg's six decades of experience have proved to the firm. 'The complete rules of pattern-making you can read in a book – but that's less than one per cent of the knowledge you need to be a good patternmaker,' he says. Sadly, though, the reason that Ellsberg – his secret weapon – was available to work was the downturn in the local economy over the past two decades.

North Carolina was once America's rag trade heartland, a state where, at one time, 40 per cent of workers were employed by the textiles industry in some way. Soon after the signing of 1994's free trade



IT'S AN UNLIKELY PARTNERSHIP — THE MILLENNIAL ENTREPRENEUR AND THE 82-YEAR-OLD GERMAN-BORN SEAMSTRESS

agreement, those jobs began shifting overseas. The statistics are dramatic. In the 20 years since that trade accord, apparel-manufacturing jobs stateside have declined by 90 per cent. The bulk of those losses were concentrated in the area around the cities of Greensboro, Raleigh and Durham in eastern North Carolina. Here, Ellsberg and her ilk had spent their lives designing and producing America's favourite clothes – blue jeans. Now, that wealth of expertise is drawing a cadre of smart businesses to the area once again, like a real-life remake of the De Niro-Hathaway comedy, *The Intern*.

After working as a chef at New York's Nobu, Lytvinenko stumbled into a fashion career when he made himself a few pairs of jeans. From the outset, he sought veteran talents. When he bought vintage sewing machines that had been mothballed from local factories, he realised the mechanics who had once worked on them could offer essential advice. 'I drove

Shared experience

From left: Raleigh Denim cofounder Victor Lytvinenko and his octogenarian seamstress, Christel Ellsberg; the jean-making process; Raleigh Denim's store



WHERE TO GO AND WHAT TO DO:

STAY

The creative resurgence in North Carolina extends beyond fashion. A former bank in downtown Durham has been co-opted by the arty 21c Museum Hotels chain. The 17-storey site was designed by the same architects as the Empire State Building and the ground floor teller area has been turned into the high-ceilinged Counting House restaurant. Common areas act as a gallery, with art largely from the owners' collection, and the check-in desk doubles as a Damien Hirst-worthy vitrine for objets. Doubles from £150pn. 21cmuseumhotels.com/durham/

EAT AND DRINK

North Carolina is home to one of the USA's most promising chefs, Ashley Christensen. She debuted with the comfort food-driven reboot of Poole's Diner and has built an empire of half a dozen spots – most recently, the award-winning Death & Taxes, which focuses on wood-fired cooking (ac-restaurants.com). Other upstarts nearby include Raleigh Denim's neighbour, Videri Chocolate Factory (viderichocolatefactory.com), where cocoa lures in passers-by. There's also Trophy Brewing, a craft beer operation housed in a local stripmall (trophybrewing.com).

to these tiny towns in the Blue Ridge mountains, where there were maybe 1,000 people, and just walked into the diner and asked, "Who used to work at the factory?" Thanks to the old-timers he met, his factory today uses a WWII-era buttonholer. And if the machinery ever malfunctions, he knows exactly the right person to fix it.

The fabric Lytvinenko uses is another nod to the area's heritage. It's made barely an hour away, in one of the few mills that survived the downturn in North Carolina – the 125-year-old Cone Denim, just outside Greensboro. And, much like Christel Ellsberg at Raleigh Denim, Cone's older employees are proving critical to the future of the company.

Certainly, there are several computerised looms inside the large factory but they sit alongside rows of clattering analogue counterparts that operate on shock-absorbing wooden floors rather than standard concrete. The retro looms produce quality selvedge denim, not only for Lytvinenko, but also for premium brands such as

Explorations / Vintage talent

Denim's in the detail

From top: bobbins at the New South Manufactory; the company's founder, David Brown



J Crew and Bonobos. Cone even launched an online shop for its house line, White Oak, earlier this year. The cavernous room smells salty and damp – humidity keeps the fabric supple – and the whoosh of the looms as they work forms a gentle breeze. If it weren't for the noise, the factory floor would feel like a day at the seaside.

'It takes four or five years to just feel comfortable working on a loom,' says Tex Robinson, his distinctive North Carolina drawl lingering on every word. The 68-year-old has been tending those machines for almost 50 years, though he isn't the oldest employee on Cone's payroll – another is set to celebrate his

80th birthday this year. 'People think this is unskilled labour and it doesn't take much education, but they could come in here and try it one time,' Robinson smiles shyly. 'You need a good mechanical mind, 'cause if you fool around and you're not mechanically minded, you're going to have a bad day.' Listening intently to Robinson's every word is 26-year-old Glenn Crawford, his latest apprentice. He's one of the newest hires and relies almost entirely on Robinson's expertise. 'I'm his right-hand man,' Crawford says, earnestly. 'You can make this a career. All you've got to do is show up, and put your thinking cap on.'

Thirty-year-old David Brown agrees. He's another young entrepreneur who believes that manufacturing in North Carolina can be a viable business again. Brown founded and runs the year-old New South Manufactory, a cut-and-sew facility for small-scale outsourcing, which is housed in a nondescript office park outside Raleigh. It acts as a back-end factory for many vendors in the craft marketplace, making mostly home goods

and soft furnishings. It also handles larger orders – the firm has already produced products for New York's Cooper Hewitt Museum and Crate and Barrel.

Brown had little background in the garment business when he started, so he, too, turned to local veterans. It was his elderly sewing machine supplier who coached him on the assortment of equipment he needed to buy. Brown's first batch of employees were recent college grads – he calls them 'millennials who see the value in making something' – but he's about to shift focus and look for his very own Christel Ellsberg. 'My next hire will be a production type, someone retired who's awesome, creative and can see the big vision. There's a segment of the community for whom we can create jobs that don't exist any more.'

Back at Raleigh Denim, Ellsberg herself is hurrying to finish for the day. She's rushing home to get started on the handmade dog coats she sells under her own Ilkare label. Whatever time she isn't in the factory, she spends there behind a sewing machine. 'I have no interest in retirement. That would be boring as hell,' she shrugs as she prepares to leave. As Ellsberg begins tidying up her desk, and Victor Lytvinenko grabs her tape measure and moves to help, she instinctively bats his hand away, preferring to finish it herself, with a gruff smile and a slight nod. There's no better shorthand for the mutual respect between these two, very different people working in a situation that benefits them both immensely. As Lytvinenko says, a few moments after Ellsberg leaves: 'I'm her boss, but she's my mentor.' ■

[@markjellwood](#)

Mark Ellwood is the author of *Bargain Fever: How to Shop in a Discounted World*. *Rooms at the 21c Museum Hotel, Raleigh*, start at £150/ptn. [21cmuseumhotels.com](#)



GO ON THEN... DESTINATION: NORTH CAROLINA

FIND IT AT BA.COM

British Airways flies to New York JFK daily from London Gatwick, London Heathrow and London City. Flight time: around eight hours. BA operates codeshare routes with American Airlines to cover 80 US destinations, including Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. BA offers return flights to Raleigh-Durham (via New York) from London Heathrow with seven days' car hire with Avis from £699pp*. [ba.com/car](#)

COLLECT THOSE AVIOS

Join the Executive Club and collect and redeem Avios on every flight.

SWEET CAROLINA...

Visit [highlife.ba.com/carolina](#) for a shopaholic's guide to North Carolina.