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A VETERAN TEXTILE MANAGER BUILDS A THRIVING MANUFACTURER WITH ASSISTANCE FROM AN INDUSTRY GIANT.

BY DAVID MILDENBERG



Much of the story of North Carolina's textile industry is embodied in Jim Bryan, who's lived through its ups and downs during a 41-year career. Right now is an "up" at his 50-year-old Fairystone Fabrics Inc., which is enjoying the current resurgence of U.S. textiles. The Glen Raven-based company's specialty is making fabric that adheres to the roofs of dozens of car models made by big Japanese and U.S. automakers. Strong auto sales, along with demand for a fabric used in Velcro-type fasteners, sparked a 20% increase in revenue last year. This year, the company is on pace for a 10% revenue gain. Anticipating further growth, Fairystone has invested more than \$1 million in new machinery in the last few months.

Such success follows a tumultuous career. Bored after college with a police job in a tiny Massachusetts resort town, Bryan,

▲ *Former Burlington Industries manager Jim Bryan joined Fairystone Fabrics in Glen Raven in 1996 and bought the business in 2011. Alamance Community College named his company Business Partner of the Year in 2017, reflecting his advocacy of apprenticeship programs.*

now 64, joined a family friend's company in Connecticut, where he learned how to wind yarn sold to small knitting companies. He parlayed the experience into a job at textiles giant Burlington Industries Inc. He had nine different sales and manufacturing posts at the Greensboro-based company over 20 years. One of his jobs involved managing 175 people in a division of a plant that covered 1 million square feet.

Like so many in his generation of industry middle managers, Bryan left his job in the early 1990s amid the downsizing at his

employer and many of its peers. Textile and apparel manufacturing was migrating to Asia and Mexico, upending many careers across the state. Many public companies such as Burlington were either acquired by private investors or shuttered. Textile fabric finishers now employ 5,700 in North Carolina, down from a peak of 47,000 in 1990.

A couple of years after Bryan left Burlington, Alamance County mill owner Tom Bobo asked him to lead Fairystone, which Bobo's father, Harold, opened in 1968. Tom Bobo's two children didn't want to run the business, providing an opening for the industry veteran. The company, which converts yarn into unfinished fabric, relied on apparel companies for 90% of its revenue when Bryan arrived in 1996.

Apparel fabric now makes up about 5% of revenue as Bryan has added customers in new markets, especially automotive. After a decade as president, he bought the business in 2011. His goal is to add two new customers every year, a target he's met four of the last five years. "I'm trying to get in Elon Musk's pocket," he jokes, referring to the Tesla CEO.

Bryan says his approach to business "wouldn't be approved by Harvard Business School" because much of his sales come from a couple of customers. One is Glen Raven Inc., the fabrics producer that is among North Carolina's largest private companies. Glen Raven, which owns Fairystone's plant, makes up less than half of sales, Bryan says.

"We've done numerous joint ventures, and we have great respect for Glen Raven. They have a plant 700 yards down the road from us that can't function without the fabric that comes out of my plant." Glen Raven then dyes and finishes the fabric for many commercial purposes.

Still, Bryan emphasizes his efforts to remain independent, lest any customers fear that he shares proprietary information with Glen Raven. "We work hard every day to avoid showing partiality."

The textile industry remains cyclical, which Fairystone painfully realized in the 2007-09 recession. With car sales slumping to their lowest level in decades, the company laid off about 50 workers in 2009-10 after employment had peaked at 147. Fortunately, car-industry observers knew that sales would rebound — people need cars, which don't last forever, Bryan says.

And so they have.

Fairystone now has 135 employees who run the plant 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. He plans to add another half-dozen workers this year because of mounting sales.

While more business-friendly tax policies are helpful, Bryan says, "We've been building business for the last five years with new customers, new markets, and there has been a trend to bring business back to the U.S. for logistics reasons."

It's refreshing to see innovative companies such as Fairystone and Glen Raven excel, says David Hinks, dean of N.C. State University's College of Textiles. "The textiles industry is one of the most vibrant industries in our state with significant interest by companies to invest in the state — more than any time in recent memory."

Bryan says his departure from Burlington proved to be a godsend. "It was tough for a year or two, but it allowed me to understand what I'm good at, where I am most happy and what size of company I could excel at." ■



▲ Fairystone Fabrics operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Idling machines causes cooling that leads to more equipment breakdowns, owner Jim Bryan says.