

■ THE L.C. KING MANUFACTURING CO., INC.

Location: Corner of 7th Street and Shelby, Bristol, Tenn.

CEO: J. Riley King

History: Founded by Landon C. King in 1913 in downtown Bristol. It was created to provide quality work wear. Currently, the company's 105 employees manufacture and distribute denim clothing under L.C. King's private label, Pointer Brand. Items are also manufactured for Bass Pro Shops and WearGuard.

Claim to Fame: L.C. King's employees have been provided continued employment with no layoffs or plant shut downs since 1913. In addition, the company is one of the few remaining denim clothing manufacturing companies in the nation.

Interesting Facts: Several employees have retired with more than 50 years of service.

National Ranking: Pointer Brand is sold throughout the U.S., primarily in the Southeast.

2 BESPOKE BANGLES

Jewelry made to a customer's order. BY SHIVANI VORA

3 SKIN DEEP

Hair products smell more sophisticated. BY BEE SHAPIRO



4 FRONT ROW

Jonathan Adler expands into accessories. BY ERIC WILSON

7 BOITE

The Rosebud NYC opens in Hell's Kitchen. BY BRIAN SLOAN

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ThursdayStyles

The New York Times

THURSDAY, AUGUST 15, 2013 E1

Dirty Old Factories



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN WAGNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

L. C. King Manufacturing in Bristol, Tenn., has been called a diamond in the rough for its old ways. Even Toyko hipsters love its workwear. Now, as fashion embraces Made in America, can it be a 21st-century brand?



By CATHY HORYN

Not long ago, I got an e-mail from a man thanking me for mentioning his label, Pointer Brand, in an article in 2006. This was no thank-you note. I read on: "With a lot of hard work and persistence, we recently celebrated 100 years of manufacturing in Bristol Tennessee." It was signed: "Jack King, fourth generation, L. C. King Manufacturing Company."

Before I took the bait and called him, I looked up the article. Pointer makes work clothes that are part of the rural South: a light canvas jacket worn into the field in the morning and removed as the sun rises, dungarees and overalls of various types depending on well-marked preferences: low-back in Kentucky, high-back

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Scouting Report

Collaborations

Put your best foot forward in a pair of THE MAN REPELLER X SUPERGA kicks, a range of jazzy styles like a velvet high-top (\$140) and metallic bouclé low-top (\$145). Each comes with regular laces as well as a set of longer laces so that wearers have the option of wrapping them around their ankles to approximate Leandra Medine's sneaker look. At Superga, 78 Crosby Street. ... In other footwear news, the INSTYLE FOR NINE WEST capsule collection encapsulates fall's top styles, from single sole pumps (\$89) to polished ankle boots (\$149). At 750 Lexington Avenue.

Openings

The men's wear store SEAN, the exclusive retailer in the United States for the French label Emile Lemaire, has a new West Village outpost, which is the place to go if

from independent — and independent-minded — New York City designers. The mix includes a Naturevsfuture vest dress made of surplus cotton pointe and cut and sewn in the Garment Center (\$220). At 75 Ninth Avenue.

Sales

For those who feared that ALEXANDER WANG had depleted his backstock when he gave away clothes at his "one-time only special event" last month, rest easy: the always-anticipated August sample sale will go on, from Tuesday through Saturday, Aug. 24. Look for markdowns up to 70 percent on fall 2012 merchandise like a pelican satchel in bandage (\$350). At 131 Greene Street. ... Other steep discounts this week include the KISAN sample sale, Thursday through Sunday, where you can find items like a Vanessa Bruno striped blazer (\$98) for up to 80 percent off; and the SCOOP NYC



Dirty Old Factories

CONTINUED FROM PAGE E1

in Georgia. But these details I learned later. My article merely stated that the designer Junya Watanabe had modified some Pointer jackets for his men's line. These changes, funnily, were not unlike the careful and ingenious improvements that farmers used to make on their old clothes, except the Watanabe deluxe versions started at \$800.

The people at the Tennessee factory were oblivious of all this. Oh, they knew a Japanese firm had requested some items, but they never took the trouble to find out more. Not indifferent but perhaps numb is a better description of Jack King's response, because indeed he did crave a connection to high fashion.

It was hard not to be impressed by the position he was in: he owned a factory in the South that hadn't been modernized, which in the eyes of sophisticates made it a diamond in the rough, and yet, to him, in 2006, it often felt like a lump of iron strapped to his back. As I soon discovered, he came to the factory reluctantly, in 1999, when his father, Riley, became ill. Jack was in his dream job in Atlanta, at a food broker, he said, "studying the French fry market for the Pacific Rim."

While looking up the article, I decided to punch "L. C. King" into the newspaper's archive. Up came dozens of citations for not only L. C. King but also the H. P. King department store and E. W. King, a dry goods wholesaler; all were in Bristol. They appeared in a column, *Arrival of Buyers*, that ran from the preflapper era to the dawn of designer ready-to-wear, in 1970. If you sold or made goods in the United States and you wanted it known that your buyer was in town, you telephoned a number to register. In 1930, you dialed LACKAWANNA 1000.

The lists astonished me. From Hecht's Reliable stores in Baltimore, to Kaufmann's in Pittsburgh, to Laskin & Bro. in El Paso, they were a virtual directory of American retailing in an age before Walmart. I saw the O'Neil Co. of Akron. My mom bought her stockings — Hanes South Pacific, three pairs to a box; did a little wiggle walk when you lifted them out of the tissue — at the Coshocton, Ohio, branch.

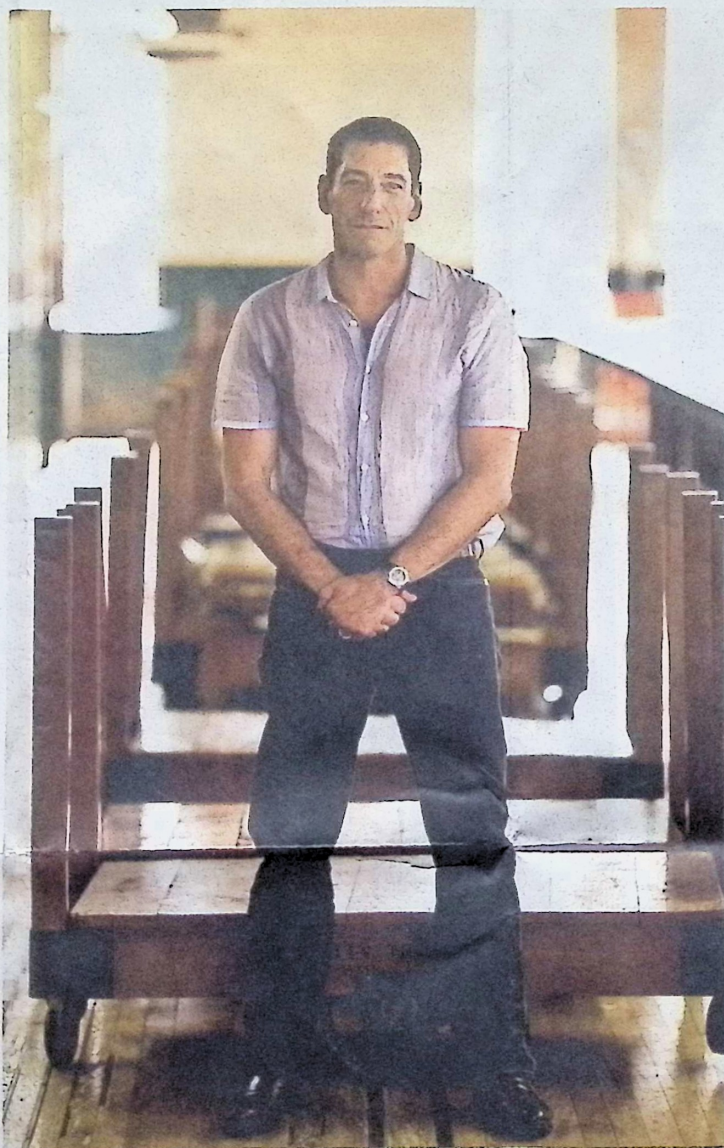
Why I should be amazed at lists of defunct companies, when many closed for well-known reasons, I can't say. Certainly the global fashion industry doesn't need our dirty old factories. It has gotten along without them for 30 years, after all.

On the other hand, a drive to Tennessee might be interesting, I thought. It was May. In the back of my mind was the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh that killed 1,129 people, but my last thought, and still my last thought, was that a little factory in the Appalachians, near the Virginia line, was going to make a difference. It was David and Goliath; a campfire compared to the industrial Hades of south China.

And you can't fault the Chinese for taking the lead in apparel and textile production in the '80s, for modernizing, when Western nations, including ours, wanted to be in new technology industries, though for many people that wound up meaning low-wage fast-food jobs instead of work in a clothing factory at twice the pay.

No, I was simply looking for something that felt feasible. A road trip, a different conversation from the ones I was having. I called Jack King, and a week later was 650 miles down I-81.

On the phone, I found out a little more about the company. L. C. King is the oldest cut-and-sew factory in the United States still owned by its founding family. In addition to Pointer, which Mr. King's great-grandfather Landon Clayton King, a



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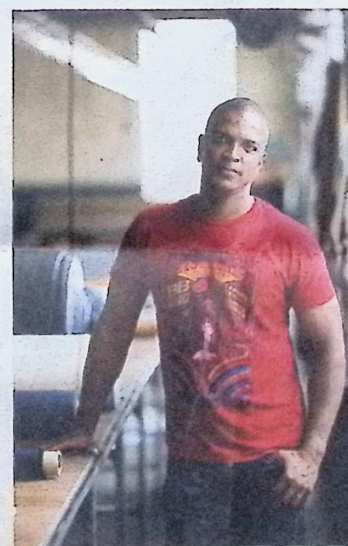
The great-grandfather of Jack King, above, the chief executive, started the company in 1913. Below, from top, are Kathy Bolling, who has worked 41 years at the factory; Donna Trivett, for 33 years; and Roxie Blaylock, who has worked at L. C. King since age 19. "It's the only job I've ever had. I love it here," she says.

from another time. It was beautiful.

Eventually I found Mr. King in the gym he had installed in a space once filled, pre-Nafta, with Bass Pro Shop gear. Several middle-aged employees were doing pull-ups with a trainer named Chad. "I'm an athlete, a competitive swimmer," Mr. King said. "I didn't want the employees to think a workout would be on their time. It's an option."

A medium-built man, 50, in jeans and a brown plaid shirt, with a tense air and a booming laugh, Mr. King introduced me to Ben Collins, hired about a year ago to handle social media and other types of communication. Then we went on a tour of the factory, starting in the stockroom, where wooden crates from the '30s serve as shelves for chore jackets and brand-new blue overalls.

Over the next two days, and later on the phone, it was Mr. Collins who helped un-



Marc Nelson jeans designed by Marcus Hall, left, are made at L. C. King. Marinda Holt, above left, is the plant manager.

ravel the enigma of L. C. King — and of Jack King, as well. Perhaps it is because he is a sensitive observer, and an outsider, who recognizes what a valuable asset the factory is in Mr. King's world — maybe more than Mr. King does.

The other person who helped was Marinda Holt, who has worked at L. C. King for 26 years. Skilled at almost any job in the factory, with abundant hair and a sassy charm, she works most closely with the outside designers who come in. She's a remarkable woman.

Mr. Collins had owned an ad agency in town, and after selling it, considered joining a major firm. He said: "The agencies I was encountering just had no taste. It's like your end game is Chick-fil-A. I think coming to work here was a fantasy I was living. I walked by it all the time. My wife, Cam, built the back end of the Web site. I thought: 'Why not? This is going to be an unpredictable and rewarding experience.' I'm so happy I've done it."

Early on, he saw that Pointer was getting lots of traffic from Reddit, thanks to Japanese hipsters and West Coast workwear fans, and the company was ignoring it. Clearly Mr. Collins regards L. C. King as this delicate organism. "As someone who was burned out on fake marketing, I got here and I suddenly felt, 'Don't touch any-

and Riley getting into it so many times. He was so cocky. In his \$200 pair of jeans, and here we are in our Walmart specials." She laughed. "But he's changed that, too — a whole lot. I love him like family now."

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At the end of my first day in Bristol, Ms. Holt showed me some designers' jeans that function as an atelier where designers are free to work. Mr. King invites them in. It is not the refined quality of an Los Angeles factory or of, say, 3x1, Scott Morrison's SoHo facility. It is a different quality. After trying to make his Marc Nelson jeans in Los Angeles, Marcus Hall, a charismatic guy who used to be a contractor, came to L. C. King.

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Mr. King spoke matter-of-factly, and was very polite. As he said, "I'm not here to dog anybody." Before Nafta, though, the factory employed 130 people, and now it's 28. Having Mr. Watanabe's endorsement made a big difference in terms of confidence, he said. "It really helped us know that we can sew stuff that people want as fashion."

In the last two years a number of new designers, a number of designers interested in American-made, have used the factory. "We've got one label from Knoxville — Marc Nelson — his stuff is absolutely gorgeous," Mr. King said.

He then said he planned to travel to London soon to meet with an individual who had been involved with Nudie jeans, as he believed L. C. King could be developed as a brand. And Mr. Watanabe has been back in touch.

"We're doing some jeans for him right now," Mr. King said. "His office called and asked, 'Can you do 200 pairs?'" That number falls short of minimums in Los Angeles jeans factories. "My attitude is, heck, I'll do anything."

Before we hung up, he said: "We start at 5:30 a.m. Yes, ma'am, summer hours. There's no air-conditioning."

I ARRIVED just after 8. The factory sits a block from Bristol's main drag, trim and plain, its red brick and slanted dusty windows newly washed by sunlight. In spite of the hour, the factory didn't seem busy. I waited on the sidewalk, thinking someone might see me, and then I entered and climbed the stairs to the factory floor.

Straight ahead was a vast room with a cutting table, the length of a bowling alley, and at the end was a man — Will Holt, he is — pushing an electric knife through a stack of denim. The pine floor was a dark patina. There was hardly a noise except the purr of sewing machines or the slap of the pocket machine and a radio somewhere. The place was archaic, its rhythms

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"L. C. didn't wear overalls," he said. "I feel he's one of the keys."

Jack King's actions are harder to figure. He surprised me when, as we were coming

'It's more like coming home than coming to a job.'

KATHY BOLING,
L. C. KING EMPLOYEE

into the factory's original, sun-faded office, he said: "I can't get Cone Denim to return my phone calls. I've called their office, no lie, five times in the past year." Cone, in nearby Greensboro, N.C., is a renowned supplier of narrow selvedge denim, made on '40s-era looms. It's hard to harbor serious fashion ambitions without it. Mr. King shrugged. "But that's O.K. People don't really know L. C. King Manufacturing exists. I am the secret of the South. I really am."

Yet, between 2004 and 2011, he did make connections with fashion folks in New York, including Lee Norwood, a senior executive at Ralph Lauren, who helped Mr. King develop a pattern for a \$60 five-pocket jeans style, today one of L. C. King's best sellers.

"He's done a good job with very little help," Mr. Norwood said. "But he needs someone he can trust on the creative side. There's so much to be uncovered there, but it has to be done with vision. I told him, 'You've got what every fashion brand doesn't have: purity.'"

In fact, initially, part of the problem was that Mr. King really didn't know what a factory did. As a boy, he wasn't allowed on the sewing floor. Also, he said, "My dad and I had this really torrid relationship." He didn't get full control of the factory until 2009.

Ms. Holt recalled: "When Jack first got here, I couldn't stand him, to be honest with you. He thought it had to be his way or no way. 'We're going into fashion.' But we weren't into fashion then. We were in overalls and dungarees. I remember him

and Riley getting into it so many times. He was so cocky. In his \$200 pair of jeans, and here we are in our Walmart specials." She laughed. "But he's changed that, too — a whole lot. I love him like family now."

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At the end of my first day in Bristol, Ms. Holt showed me some designers' jeans made in the factory — by Lumina, a casual men's line in Raleigh, N.C.; the beautiful Marc Nelson hand-distressed jeans; and a cool pair of Ruell and Ray by Ashley James, who left the factory after she and Mr. King tangled. Still, Ms. James said: "There's a gold mine — a gold mine. The skill set is there."

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"Let me say this: in Los Angeles, it was very duplicated," he said. "I feel like, here in Bristol, it's done by hand, like the human touch is clear." Mr. Hall, who has produced 3,000 pairs of jeans in different styles at the factory, added, "By me coming here, it's helped them to learn and take them out of their box."

IF YOU WANT to know what makes fashion truly different (and maybe, as well, our stores and our communities), the answer is not a designer or a marketer. It is a manufacturer.

"Factories don't just exist as factories," Robert Kidder, the owner of New England Shirt Company, in Fall River, Mass., said one afternoon. "They have to have a purpose and fulfill something special. American product has to be different."

In four years, Mr. Kidder, a former men's wear executive, has built a thriving business making private-label shirts for brands like Polo but also the nation's growing number of men's shops. No minimums. He recently cut an elbow-patched oxford shirt for a shop in Westerly, R.I., called Huxter. The owner, who got the idea on a whim, started the summer with 45 of the \$132 shirts. So far, he's sold 300.

"If you approach American-made with that attitude," Mr. Kidder said, "it allows you to see how you can rebuild an industry in pieces."

When I caught up with Mr. King after his London trip, he said the plan is now to bring the L. C. King brand more into the world. He said he had spoken to a group of investors about possibly adding \$500,000 in new machines. And he's even reached Cone. Of course there are enormous challenges. One, as Tracy Doyle, the chief branding officer at Box Studios in New York, notes, is how to put a new spin on the craft story now that luxury brands have made it old hat.

But at least Mr. King is not such a secret anymore. The other day a major Nashville star contacted him about making some clothes.

"His laugh echoed through the whole factory," Ben Collins said. "He just has pride in his people and the factory. He wants this company and this town to make out O.K."



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Marc Nelson jeans designed by Marcus Hall, left, are made at L. C. King. Marinda Holt, above left, is the plant manager.