

Johnson, Joe: Denim Days In Erwin ^[1]

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Joe Johnson: Denim Days In Erwin

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 12/9/2001. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited with Joe Johnson a couple of blocks from the abandoned textile mill that was the town of Erwin's lifeblood. For nearly a century, Erwin Mills made denim cloth, and the town proudly called itself "the denim capital of the world." Joe worked in the mill from 1943 until his retirement in 1986.

The closing of Erwin Mills last year signaled the passing of an age, and not just in Erwin and Harnett County. Textiles remains the state's largest manufacturing industry, but textile employment has declined by almost half in the last 30 years. Boarded-up textile mills and empty cotton warehouses are an enduring part of our landscape now.

Joe and I talked at a wonderful museum that he and other Erwin Mills veterans have launched next to the public library downtown. The museum highlights Erwin's mill village heritage. And this past year, despite the mill's closing, Erwin still celebrated "Denim Days," its largest festival. Joe says the Chamber of Commerce hasn't decided yet whether to rename the festival in the future, but no matter what, you're all welcome.

In Joe Johnson's words:



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My father was raised here on the Cape Fear River, and that was long before they even imagined the mill starting here. When the Dukes and the Erwins and all those folks decided that they wanted the property, my family literally sold them the property. My father, my uncles and aunts, you name it, they were all there. They did everything from spinning the cotton to making the cloth. One of the first houses that was built was a boardinghouse for the mill officials, and my grandmother ran it. Then my mother, her family lived up beyond Lillington and came down to Erwin, got a house and got jobs in the mill. Lots of times, you'd have folks who, back in the early days, worked on the farm all their life. That farming life was tough. They'd have to pick cotton. Cotton was hand-picked in the fall of the year. Then the farmer would take it to the gin and you'd see a line of trucks and mules and wagons here to the mill. Cotton was weighed and sold right here, and they'd end up weaving it and selling it. The Erwin plant always made primarily denim. When I was a child, denim meant overalls, pure old bib overalls, like the old country boy out planting his farm with his mule would wear. And coveralls, say, for a mechanic. Later, we got into making jeans. During the Depression, this plant never stopped. It never stopped. It ran. There are some shrewd people that have operated Erwin Mills. The Duke family and their friends were all millionaires, and they came down here to the east bank of the river. They bought land in the 1890s and the mill was up and running by 1903. They built a big mill and a power plant and a brick mill. They built the churches, a hospital, houses for folks. They owned the railroad, too. We had our own icehouse, our own school. Folks came from all over the country trying to get into the little town of Duke. That's what Erwin was called at that time. Then, in 1925, the Dukes and the Erwins built an entire new mill, doubled the number of houses, and brought in the doctors. They didn't just work in the mill. The mill provided us with a swimming pool, tennis courts, a bowling alley, even started a theater. We had a semipro ball team. We had a town band. We had a zoo, and we had a big park. After the guys worked in the mill, I'll never forget that mill whistle either. You had your "wake whistle." That was an hour or more before you started work, then when the "work whistle" sounded everything started humming. Most of the time, folks got used to it and never even noticed it. All that went its way after the Second World War. That was a whole new world of change then. In the late '40s and early '50s, the houses were sold to the employees, and they started selling off the different farmlands and whatnot. Most of the time, the mill finally closed because they could make more money operating in Mexico than in Erwin, North Carolina. Bottom line. At the peak time, the mill probably employed around 2,400 folks. But later on, in the late '70s, when the new machines came, they closed the mill down for good, you're talking about 1,400 people losing their job in a two-year period. The first folks were the young bunch, the recent hires and some with maybe 10, 12 years seniority. But the last bunch, there'd be the same way. I never saw a computer till I was about 45. My son works at BTI, my daughter-in-law works for IBM, and I go in their computer room at home and I see all that stuff, and I say, "Hey, that's nice. That's great. Let's go to Hor

David Cecelski is a visiting professor at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies.

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