



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

The Made in America Resistance Is Now

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This Fall we weathered some major challenges – those of us who traveled through Hurricane Francine were stressed about the trip, navigated some choppy flights and delayed schedules, but ultimately we arrived safely in Mobile, Ala. to experience surprisingly nice weather, and a truly fantastic lineup of speakers at the SEAMS Annual Fall Conference.

It feels disingenuous to speak about this minor hurricane without acknowledging the far more devastating storm, Hurricane Helene, which ravaged Western North Carolina just a couple weeks later, and has wiped out homes, businesses, roads and more. Many of our friends (industry and otherwise) in the area will continue to deal with the effects and aftermath of this disaster for a long time – and they will need help to rebuild. I urge you to review local organizations as well as check in with our colleagues in the area to see how we can assist them, to ensure we don't lose more of our American textile industry. For instance, SEAMS member [Apex Mills](#) has established a fully developed supply chain to provide support to the area. They are accepting donations of products at their facility in Graham, NC. The products are then transported and delivered at the local level, in partnership with [Kimesville Road Baptist Church](#) in Burlington, NC, and [Anchor Missions International](#), in Pisgah Forest, NC.

The inspiration for this article came to me in September, sparked by the energizing and gritty keynote story of perseverance told by Origin Brands founder, [Pete Roberts](#). He walked us through the highs and lows of designing and manufacturing his first products, of waking up realizing things could and *should* be better. He built his own manufacturing facility, restored a loom, abandoned by time, and enlisted the help of craftsmen to learn the skills necessary to do it here, and do it right.

This message reverberated through the conference room, and was reinforced by "[Making It In America](#)" author, [Rachel Slade](#), whom I interviewed on the final day of the conference. Having read her book earlier in the year, and having worked with many countless small brands over my career, the stories of Origin Brands and American Roots (profiled by Slade), resonated with me on several levels. Determined to learn all I possibly could and get better at my craft (pattern making) I spent many hours early in my career working with the factories I was partnered with on behalf of the brands I worked with, to become a better pattern maker, designing for manufacturability. I wasn't paid for those hours by my clients, but it was the best educational experience I could have ever asked for, and those hours are what earns me my living today.

The industry as it stands today is one that is resilient beyond measure. We have collectively been hit hard by several storms in recent years, stemming from decades of outsourced



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manufacturing, to Covid more recently, which only exacerbated existing issues around rising shipping costs, tariffs and trade issues including the de minimis rules.

The industry has made a good effort to stand its ground, but at a certain point, we have to fortify and fight back. The losses over the last several years (and months) are devastating and impact our supply chain beyond the loss of a single company. We are losing integral parts of our industry, but also of our country.

When Pete spoke about his experience of having his designs knocked off by his own factory contractor overseas, and how he got mad – he wasn't just experiencing an emotion. He made it a driving force in building a U.S. supply chain – taking his brand from one of many "Designed in USA," to one of fewer "MADE IN USA." This was a call to activate, to rise to the challenge of our rival (queue up "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor here).

In my talk with Rachel Slade, we discussed similar themes, and her passion for manufacturing was thrilling to experience. Having someone shine a light on the issues that we care deeply about, telling the story of American Roots and their tenacity to succeed as a first-generation factory and brand. What I also appreciated about her book, and what she shared on stage with us, was her deep dive into the history of the textile industry, and how it was absolutely fueled by our founding fathers' desire for independence.

During the war of 1812 [Francis Cabot Lowell](#) used his photographic memory to bring the power loom from Britain to America, jumpstarting the American Industrial Revolution. In the early days of our nation, it was understood that to be a strong, independent country, we needed to make our own goods, rather than rely so heavily on imports.

Knowing this history, it's crazy to think of how much has been forgotten, for us to be where we are today.

The world is obviously much different than it was in the 1700s, and to some degree, globalization is a positive thing. However, we really do need to get back to our roots as a country. The stories, both old and new, need to spread further – so that any random American understands the true perils of continuing to shop the likes of Temu, Shein and others. Let's not save a dollar today and rob ourselves of a future.

An aside – I am positively delighted when reading internet comments on random posts and articles where people use the words "Temu" and "Shein" as adjectives to describe poor quality or knock-off editions of anything from a bad outfit or a cheap piece of jewelry, to [painted Chow Chow dogs](#) made out to be pandas in a Chinese zoo. The [SNL skit "Xiemu"](#) hit on this earlier this year – Americans are starting to wake up ... but we still have to get them to care and change their buying habits. Still, some mainstream recognition of the problem is still a starting point.

EMPOWERING THE MADE IN AMERICA MOVEMENT



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We know that the dollars spent at American companies are reinvested heavily into the communities in which they reside, and a rising tide raises all boats. But that idea seems to have been lost at sea.

So, how can we fight back?

It starts with conversations, but those need to lead to action. The Alphabet Soup Collective that I highlighted in my last blog is a great start. We need more articles and books and documentaries to highlight successful textile supply chain stories.

[USA Today reports](#) that young people are deciding to eschew the big city and live in smaller towns. We've heard it before, and probably again: Gen Z values work-life balance more than a big paycheck ([Fortune](#)). According to [Vogue Business](#), they're interested in videos about fashion factories on TikTok, and it's proven that making physical things brings a sense of true accomplishment and pride in one's work ([Psychology Today](#)), something that pushing papers and attending endless meetings will never. Think about someone under 30 – they've experienced the world in all its vastness in a digital manner, they're quick to learn and adopt new technologies. However, take a moment to consider why the music aisle in stores are full of vinyl records again ([New York Times](#))? Tactile, physical experiences, being a part of something bigger than one's self – all are contributing here. How can we harness these trends?

Board member proving that making it here can be done

I've had several great conversations with colleagues following the conferences and trade events I attended this Fall. I spoke with fellow SEAMS Board member Steve Hawkins, which started as a 30 minute call to get a couple comments and learn more about each other's businesses, and evolved into an hour and a half where I met members of his team, did a virtual tour of his facility, and I gained a better understanding for what drives his thriving business, [America Knits](#).

Early in our meeting I was introduced to two young members of his team, and as we continued, I was fascinated and excited to learn that they were hardly alone in their age bracket. Steve has made a concerted effort in choosing a location which is close to supply chain partners, near to Georgia Southern University, and is in a rural small town where young people want to stay and make a life. He's found by offering flexible daytime hours, he's attracted young people who value their work-life balance. He spends time identifying which personalities will thrive better in various roles, making cross training a priority, and has invested in automation, which makes the work more interesting and less stressful for the worker, while being more efficient for the plant.



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Steve recognizes that the younger generation is not inherently invested into working at a single company for life. His company culture is more of a “family vibe, family business,” and by being flexible (someone can work a shift with school-aged children and be home to meet the afternoon bus, for example), he has found that “a lot more people want to stay here.”

Training people in multiple roles will give them the skills and opportunity to run their own plant within three years, giving America Knits, as well as the employee, a very viable and exciting career path. Team goals rather than individual goals have proven to be great motivators, and by raising the average pay rate along with the standard productivity benchmarks has resulted in happier employees who stay with the company. What a striking difference from what I hear over and over again – that recruiting young talent is so difficult.

He shared some stories with me about making lifelong industry friends – who are actually really friends now – and other anecdotes about past work experiences, which I appreciated. We agreed this is not a “normal” business. It’s unpredictable. Somehow, we all seem to thrive on this, but I’m sure even the adrenaline junkies among us would still value more stability.

We need to make it known that our products are not just better, but best. We value high-quality materials, and good fit.

In discussing his small brand [Seeds 2 Seams](#), which boasts on the label, “Made in Small Town, USA,” Steve spoke about the importance of the consumer experience:

“The first time, they buy for the graphic,” he said. “The second time, it’s because of the shirt. The fabric, the cut. The guy doesn’t know that the armhole is cut correctly, he just knows it feels good.”

The America Knits motto is, *“Together, we are building a new story.”*

On that note, I believe our story should not be a story of our resilience.

Our story will not be passive, but rather one of action.

We are the Resistance.