

# Cherokee Textile Mills moved to Sevier County from Knoxville

*By Carroll McMahan*

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On September 17, 1953 a delegation from Sevier County visited the management of Cherokee Textile Mills in Knoxville to urge the industry to relocate in Sevierville. The passage of “ The Industrial Revenue Bond Act “ by the Tennessee Legislature in 1951 made it possible for municipalities to lure industries to their locale by offering property, operating facilities, and financing through municipal bonds.

At the time, controversies between Cherokee Mills and the City of Knoxville had escalated over the quality of the water which the city supplied. The yarn dyeing process required water with constant and specific quality characteristics in order to consistently dye the yarn to the proper shade. If the yarn was not dyed to the standard shade it had to be re-dyed or in some cases it resulted in the yarn being wasted.

Furthermore, there was friction between A. G. Heinsohn, Jr., president of the company, and some of Knoxville’s influential political leaders over Heinsohn’s extreme conservative political views.

Following the initial meeting, several potential sites were inspected. On November 20, 1953 Heinsohn and the company’s attorney M. W. Egerton met with a delegation from Sevier County which included officials representing the

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City of Sevierville and Sevier County, legal counsel, and State Representative Fred C. Atchley.

At this meeting a proposal was presented by the Sevier County delegation and discussed item by item. Both parties accepted the proposal. On December 10, 1953 Heinsohn, with the approval of the stockholders, announced the Mill's intent to move to Sevier County.

Under the terms of the agreement, contingent on Cherokee Mills moving to Sevier County, the City of Sevierville agreed to acquire a 175-acre tract for the building, construct an air-conditioned building to specifications of Cherokee Textile Mills containing 175, 000 square feet, and pay for the dismantling of the machinery in Knoxville and the erection of the machinery in the new facility.

After the building was completed, Sevierville would lease the property and building to Cherokee Mills. Adequate utilities such as water, sewer, electricity, natural gas, and telephone service would be supplied or arranged for by the City.

The City also agreed to extend railroad tracks from the existing line to the plant. This was never done. There were other items agreed on, mostly of a legal nature. However, there was another major consideration in which Cherokee Mills agreed to buy the bonds to be issued by the City of Sevierville. The maturity dates on the bonds extended over several years in order to avoid a financial strain on the City.

On January 11, 1954, Daniel Construction Company was awarded the building contract and work was started shortly thereafter. By early 1955 the movement of machinery began and for several months production was taking place at the Knoxville plant and the new facility in Sevierville.

During the transition period and for several years thereafter, the Mill arranged for a special bus service between the Mill and Knoxville to accommodate the employees who continued to reside in Knoxville. Those who rode the bus paid a nominal fee for the bus service, but the Mill paid most of the cost.

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Cherokee Textile Mills was organized in 1916 as Cherokee Spinning Company and built a plant at the corner of Concord Street and Sutherland Avenue. At the start-up, a man was hired to run the plant but after a few years he was dismissed due some questionable accounting procedures which resulted in the showing of profits when there was none. Shareholders were even paid dividends based on the misleading information. A new manager was hired and after a period of time real profits were realized.

Around 1930 looms were added and the spun yarn was utilized in the weaving process. At that time the name of the company was changed to Cherokee Textile Mills. The Mill continued as a weaving plant until it was closed in 2004 by Dan River Mills, who had purchased Cherokee in 1997.

During the years of the Great Depression, the company was hard-pressed to survive. In 1936, the Board of Directors contacted A.G. Heinsohn, Jr., a fabric salesman in New York City, to see if he would consider taking over the operation. An agreement was worked out and Heinsohn became president of the company.

Heinsohn's first step after taking over the reins of the mill was to call a meeting of the operating management. He stated he knew very little about the manufacturing process but if they would efficiently run the plant he would sell the fabric. It was not long until the plant was running full time and had regained its financial strength.

Shortly after becoming president, A.G. Heinsohn, Jr. also became president of Spindale Mills in Spindale, North Carolina under the same understanding he had with Cherokee earlier, that he would sell the fabric if the plant management and employees would produce a quality product. From that time until the two manufacturing plants along with a fabric finishing plant located near Spindale were sold to Dan River in 1997; they operated as one entity for all practical purposes.

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When Cherokee Mills moved to Sevierville in 1955, Lester Deaver was the plants manager. About a year later, Henry Morrell became plant manager and served in that capacity until his retirement at the end of 1974. Austin Stubblefield succeeded Morrell as plant manager, and then was followed by A.B. "Al" Blanton. Keith Jenkins was serving as plant manager when Dan River closed the plant in 2004.

Charlie Bell was the personnel manager at the time the plant relocated in Sevierville. He was extremely active in civic affairs of the county and was well known by many local citizens. Russell Norville followed Bell as personnel manager and also contributed greatly to the community. Johnny Smith succeeded Norville and remained in the position until the plant closed.

Through the years a number of local Sevier County citizens served in management positions including; Amos Newman, Jack Henry, Merritt Teaster, John Huff, and Ray Watson.

In 2004 Dan River discontinued production at the Sevierville plant. The property was sold to the City of Sevierville who in turn sold the property to Covenant Health. In 2008, after demolition of the textile plant, Covenant Health began construction on the new LeConte Medical Center on the site.