

He's The 'Duke' Of The Textile Industry

GASTONIA — America is so full of the stories of young people from modest or deprived circumstances who became successful through hard work and dedication that they have become almost a commonplace of our national life.

The story of W. Duke Kimbrell is a little different, though, if for no other reason than the fact that he forged his success only a mile or so from where he was born and grew up. You'll probably find that in most such cases young men of the Horatio Alger mold travel a good distance away from home to build success and a good life for themselves.

Duke Kimbrell is the president and chief executive officer of Parkdale Mills, Inc., and he has pretty well run the company since he was 35 years old - some 20 years ago. He started work at the textile firm when he was 14, to earn spending money and to help his older siblings with their college expenses. Today you can spot his Cadillac parked in a reserved space outside the mill office. There were a number of years - even after he had finished college - when his transportation to and from work was a bicycle.

The company he manages is as much a phenomenon as the man himself. When Mr. Kimbrell officially assumed the presidency it consisted of the Gastonia mill. Today there are five additional plants in three other North Carolina cities, and more than 1,600 employees work for Parkdale. The production of yarns - Parkdale's product - has risen from less than 15 million pounds to 70 million and annual sales of the privately held company are up from \$11.5 million to nearly \$110 million.

But the truly striking fact about Parkdale is the firm's bottom line - its profitability. In an industry where net profits average under three percent, Parkdale during the last two years netted average profits of more than 11 percent.

Who, then, is this Duke Kimbrell whose performance is so consistently and outstandingly successful in an industry chock full of yarn manufacturers who compete fiercely with one another for orders and profits?

He's a handsome, silver-haired executive with the sort of poise and sophistication that put him right at home in corporate board rooms and executive offices. He is equally at home on the mill's production lines, where he greets employees by their first names and they call him Duke, and where he doesn't hesitate to roll up his sleeves when there's a mechanical problem and plunge into the innards of the recalcitrant machine and get dirt under his fingernails.

That isn't to say Mr. Kimbrell changes personalities depending on the people with whom he's associating. He wears the same genuine face for everyone. It's just that he's a man of immense versatility who relates easily and naturally to other humans, be they employees in the winding room or potential customers in a New York City skyscraper.

"I got a lot of help along the way," Mr. Kimbrell says of his career, "but the four people who were most important to me were my mother and father and the two men who ran Parkdale when I went to work there."

His parents, Duke Kimbrell observed, instilled in him the Christian ethic and the sense of pride that is independent of financial circumstances.

"We never had much money - it was a struggle to make ends meet - but we always had the feeling that we could make things better for ourselves through hard and honest work. And even though there wasn't a whole lot in the family bank account," Duke Kimbrell related, "I think we were downright wealthy in terms of love, mutual esteem and a cheerful willingness to make sacrifices for each other."

As mentioned, at the age of 14 Duke Kimbrell found part-time and summer work at Parkdale Mills. He did what young boys in such jobs usually did back in the 1930's - swept floors, ran errands. But he also took a quick and active interest in how the mill wound its yarns, and in how and where they were shipped to become the raw material for underwear, golf shirts, infants

wear and other textile products.

And he caught the eyes of W.L. Robinson, the firm's president and principal stockholder, and of M.R. Adams, the vice president in charge of manufacturing.

"They took a sincere interest in me," Mr. Kimbrell remembered. "When I did something right they complimented me. When I did something wrong they reprimanded me. But they allowed me to make mistakes and gave me opportunities. They were always fair. And from the time I was 14, whenever I needed a job there was always one at Parkdale for me."

Duke Kimbrell finished high school in 1943, played for three years on Gastonia High's state championship football team and continued his part-time work at Parkdale Mills.

"I was in that generation where we knew that the minute we got out of high school we would go immediately into military service," he said. "And that's how it turned out. I went into the Air Force, was stationed with the 493rd Bomb Squadron in England and flew 18 missions over Germany and occupied Europe. And when the war was over and I came home, Mr. Robinson and Mr. Adams were as good as their word - they put me right to work here in the mill."

Mr. Kimbrell plunged into yarn production and applied himself with the characteristic vigor his friends have noted.

"But I wasn't satisfied with that," he said. "I wanted to do better. So I went to Mr. Robinson and Mr. Adams and asked how I could get a better job. They told me I ought to go to college."

In June of 1946, then, Duke Kimbrell enrolled in the School of Textile Engineering at what was at the time called N.C. State College. He doubled up on courses and completed his degree requirements in only three years, graduating in June of 1949.

"The job offer at Parkdale still stood," Mr. Kimbrell said, "but I had some other offers that would have paid more money. The Parkdale folks said they'd hate to lose me, but that I had no obligation to them and they wouldn't stand in my way if I wanted to go somewhere else."

"I thought about it for quite a while, but something told me I'd be doing the right thing to go back to Parkdale. And I did."

No doubt Duke Kimbrell would have progressed and prospered at any textile company with which he might have cast his lot. But at Parkdale, unbeknownst to him at the time, circumstances would develop that provided undreamed of opportunity.

But that would be in the future. Duke Kimbrell, college degree notwithstanding, didn't come home to Gastonia to find a fancy office and title awaiting him. And he didn't expect to. He went back to the mill as a jack-of-all-trades, participating in just about every aspect of its operations. He lived with his parents, rode his bike to work at daybreak, often didn't get home until dark.

"I did a little bit of everything," Mr. Kimbrell observed. "I worked in winding on the second shift and as section man on the third shift. I filled in at all sorts of jobs. I went wherever the weakest link in the chain seemed to be. I came to work before breakfast and had to bring something to eat with me because I was not permitted to go home and eat. After about nine months they let me go back home for breakfast and some time later I was able to get a bank loan and buy a car. So I felt I was making some progress."

He was. Within a couple of years he had advanced to a position that was equivalent to an assistant superintendent. At various times during those years he was a fixer, apprentice master mechanic, section man, overseer, supervisor, cotton buyer, and salesman.

Titles for Duke Kimbrell in those days were rather indefinite and informal. The point was that from jack-of-all trades he was rapidly advancing to the status of master of them all. He was learning everything there was to know about Parkdale Mills, with the full blessings and encouragement of President Robinson and

Vice President Adams.

Increasingly he was brought in on management decisions - the types of yarn that should be manufactured to reach the most profitable markets. When customers came to Gastonia, Duke Kimbrell picked them up at the Charlotte Airport and drove them to the mill. That same day he might be called upon to diagnose some mechanical or production problem or study sales figures and make recommendations. And he started making sales calls.

"I remember one time when Mr. Robinson sent me to Philadelphia to call on a customer," Duke Kimbrell related. "The man I called on offered me a certain figure for an order. I wasn't certain whether we could fill the order at a profit for that price, so I told him I'd let him know."

"When I got back here I went to see Mr. Robinson and told him what I'd done. He didn't get made or raise his voice, but I could tell he didn't approve of how I'd handled it. Very quietly he said to me, 'Duke, it's wrong to tell a customer you'll let him know whether his price is acceptable. Always say yes or no on the spot.' And that's what we've done here ever since."

By the time the 1950's drew to a close, Duke Kimbrell was recognized as pretty much the indispensable man at Parkdale, and the third in command behind the two men who had given him a job there. Then, in 1961, Mr. Robinson died.

As Mr. Robinson had wished and paved the way for, Duke Kimbrell soon became the guiding force at Parkdale Mills. He took the title of vice president and assistant to Mr. Adams, but the latter retired in 1966, and then, in name as well as fact, Duke Kimbrell became the head man. He was invested with the title of president in 1966 and became chief executive officer in 1967.

Between the years 1961 and 1966, under Mr. Kimbrell's guidance, the Gastonia facility had doubled in size and was extensively renovated. Looking outside Gastonia for properties that might enhance Parkdale's production and profitability, Mr. Kimbrell and his board of directors decided to purchase Erlanger Mills of Lexington in 1971. That acquisition allowed for important diversification - the production of blended cotton and synthetic open-end spun yarn at Lexington, and 100 percent cotton yarns at Gastonia.

Other acquisitions followed during the 1970's: the purchase of Mooney Mills at Kings Mountain in 1977 and Amazon Mills at Thomasville in 1979. Always the innovator, Duke Kimbrell was the prime mover in having Parkdale's main plant airconditioned way back in 1951. He is said to be one of the first in the business to install automatic winders, inter-mill computers and other technical improvements. He is regarded as something of a marvel in the industry for the efficiency and lack of waste with which Parkdale Mills turns out and sends its products to market.

Mr. Kimbrell operates on simple but effective management principles that call for good employee compensation and working conditions, aggressive but fair and honest salesmanship against the firm's many competitors, and expanding on a pay-as-you-go basis. The Amazon Mill acquisition last year was paid for in cash.

"I prefer to do it that way because it keeps us from getting over our heads financially," Mr. Kimbrell explained. "As a consequence, we have remained strong even in times of recession."

He also believes strongly in clearly-drawn lines of management responsibility. "Each of our divisions is concerned only with its duties," he pointed out, "and there are no overlapping chores. Still, the divisions mesh to form an effective, efficient organizational structure."

Workaholic or not, Duke Kimbrell (a seven-day-a-week man for Parkdale Mills) has somehow found time to do a considerable amount of professional work outside the corporation he heads. He and some associates independently owned and operated a textile mill at

During North Carolina Textile Week, The Herald Salutes W Duke Kimbrell, incoming President of the North Carolina Textile Manufacturers Association. This feature article is reprinted from the 'North Carolina' Magazine

Kings Mountain which they purchased in 1968. Mr. Kimbrell sold his interest in 1973 after the facility had been renovated and made into a paying proposition.

In addition, he renovated a mill in Barcelona, Spain, which, at the request of its former owners, he put back on its feet. And he has performed similar rescue-renovation operations at a defunct mill in Puerto Rico and a tottering one on the island of Malta.

"My board of directors let me do those things as a sideline," Mr. Kimbrell said almost casually.

Obviously, this man has a worldwide reputation in the textile industry. He has a pretty good one in North Carolina, too. Next October he begins a year-long term as president of the North Carolina Association of Textile Manufacturers. He has been a director of that organization for quite some time, and is also a director of the North Carolina Textile Foundation and of the American Textile Manufacturers Institute. And he is a former president of the American Yarn Spinners Association.

Mr. Kimbrell's corporate directorships include First Union National Bank, Gastonia Mutual Savings & Loan Association, Kings Department Stores and Avon Bonded Warehouses. On the civic level he has been a director of the Gastonia United Fund, YMCA, Gaston Day School and Boys Club, and the Salvation Army. He was a trustee of the Greater University of North Carolina during the Bob Scott Administration, has served on the board of Queens College in Charlotte, and presently is a trustee at Pfeiffer College.

He and Mrs. Kimbrell - the former Dorothy Rhyne of Gastonia - are members of the First Presbyterian Church here and Mr. Kimbrell has been active in the church as an Elder, Cub Scout Master and chairman of the Board of Deacons.

A natural athlete, Duke Kimbrell plays golf and according to a partner competes on the course "like a tiger." He plays here in Gastonia and also at the Grandfather Golf and Country Club at Linville where the family owns a condominium and where Mr.

and Mrs. Kimbrell do a lot of their entertaining of Parkdale's customers.

As a natural optimist and realist, Mr. Kimbrell views the longstanding problems the American textile industry has wrestled with regarding cheap foreign imports as having eased. And he sees new opportunities for the American industry - and that obviously includes Parkdale - to build up its own export trade.

"The decline of the dollar's value in relation to the currencies of other countries has made our products more attractive," he explained. "That's especially true for the yarn business. And foreign customers have found they don't have to go through so much red tape and comply with so many complicated regulations when they buy from American manufacturers, as they do in other countries."

Mr. Kimbrell feels that recent press attention to the problem of byssinosis - the so-called Brown Lung disease said to be caused by prolonged inhalation of cotton dust in textile mills - tends to be biased against the industry, and has played down the industry's activity in seeking to find a solution to the problem. That was particularly so, he felt, with regard to a series a few months ago in The Charlotte Observer.

"We've spent millions and millions in the industry to research causes of byssinosis, and to cut down on dust levels in the mills," he asserted. "And certainly we don't object to just workmen's compensation to people who suffer from the disease and deserve payment. And I thought it was grossly unfair for the newspaper to belittle us and what we've done when the in-

dustry as a whole - and we here at Parkdale - have tried so hard and spent so much to comply with all the regulations and exerted so much effort to protect our employees. The fears are that 20 percent of all citizens - and 50 percent of all smokers - have some sort of lung disease. The textile industry cannot afford to pay for all the lung diseases of its employees. But the industry wants to pay for all those diseases contracted in the textile mills."

Duke Kimbrell, let no one doubt, is a textile executive who truly cares about the people who work for him in the production end of things. He, after all, was one of them not too many years ago. And he continues to identify with them as individual human beings.

He also insists that credit for Parkdale's years of success be spread among his executive associates - men like Vice President and Sales Manager Artie Newcombe; Director of Manufacturing Ken Pruitt; Lexington Division chief and vice president George Blomquist; and Controller and Corporate Secretary Don Stewart.

"They are an outstanding group of loyal, dedicated executives," declared Duke Kimbrell. "They know their jobs well and are free to do things their way. All I do is help steer them in the right direction."

Duke Kimbrell, one should point out, always seems unerringly to know which direction is the right one.

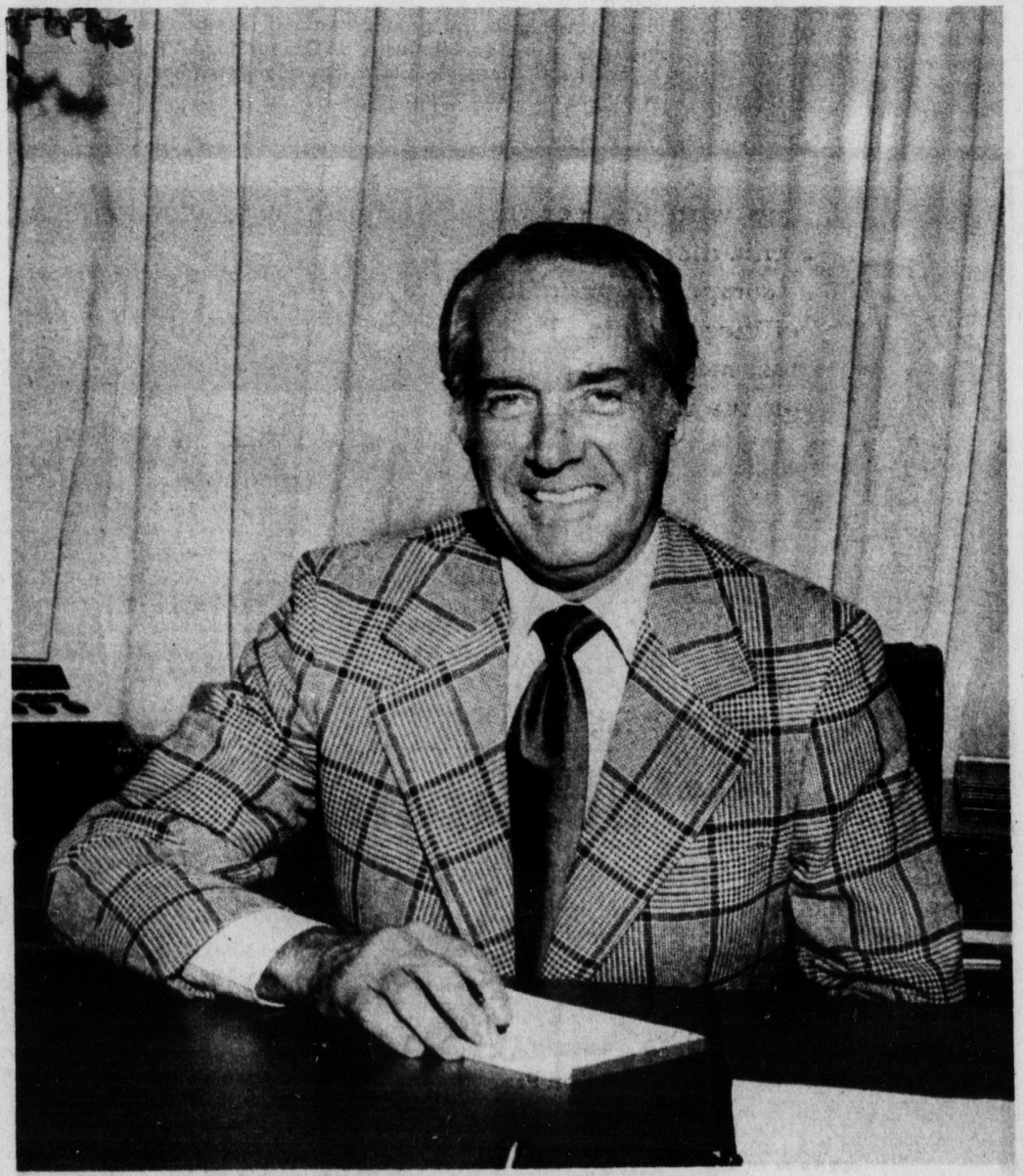
Parkdale Mill Example For Industry

Parkdale Mills is a major producer of high quality sales yarns for the United States knitwear industry.

Corporate headquarters are in Gastonia, North Carolina, which is near Charlotte, the largest city in the Carolinas. The firm was founded in 1916 as a single thread mill, but has grown steadily since that time. Currently, Parkdale operates six plants with two in Gastonia, two in Lexington, North Carolina, one in Kings Mountain, North Carolina and one in Thomasville, North Carolina. There are approximately 1500 employees and the annual payroll exceeds \$20 million.

In 1980, Parkdale produced 62 million pounds of yarn for a number of leading U.S. Knitwear manufacturers. Approximately half of the amount

cont. on page 11



W. Duke Kimbrell