

Ruppe Hosiery has climbed to the top

Now that Ruppe Hosiery has climbed to the top of the heap as the nation's largest largest double cylinder greige knitter of hosiery, it is planning another expansion.

Sixty additional machines in place and operating by the end of the year is a distinct possibility, says Tony Ruppe, the owner.

If that happens, it would require an additional 12,000-15,000 square feet of manufacturing space and Ruppe says that would probably mean the construction of a new building and more people added as production workers.

The key to everything is the availability of equipment, said Ruppe, who last year added 76 new high-speed knitting machines to his two plants, Ruppe Hosiery Mill Inc. and Kings Mountain Hosiery Mill Inc.

Last year's modernization and updating shot production to 50,000 dozen pairs of socks per week, up from an earlier projection of 35,000 dozen pairs. It also added 40 more employees to put the work force of both plants at a record 200.

"Business has been good," Ruppe observed, "our best year since he assumed full ownership of the company in 1989. "We're very optimistic about about the economy and the future. Things look very good and we are still operating six days a week."

Ruppe, who grew up in the business established by his father in the early 1960s, says the company is nearing the point of being as efficient and modernistic as possible. "Our product is second to none," he says.

The company manufactures ladies, children's and men's hosiery made from cotton and fiber blends. Approximately 80 percent of total production is ladies hosiery, 15 percent is children's and five percent men's. The men's line is 85 percent cotton and 15 percent in blends.

In its two plants, knitters produce complete socks called greige (pronounced gray). These are sold to mills that do the dyeing and finishing and then markets them to some of the nation's largest retailers.

Since he took over full management, Ruppe has become an innovative manufacturer. In the process of moving to its perch atop the market, the mills were in constant transition. However, when the new knitting machines arrived from Italy and were put in place, production smoothed out and soared.

These machines, latest to the hosiery market, gave Ruppe the capability of making fancy hosiery in multiple patterns, as opposed to the slower single-cylinder knitting machines that produced only tube socks. Beside making a better product, the new machines allowed Ruppe to fill orders quicker and more efficiently in a booming market.

It was Tony Ruppe's vision and faith in the future of the hosiery business that guided the company into plant updatings and expansions during 1994. One plant was gutted, sidewalls raised and two rows of support posts removed to increase manufacturing space.

As production increased so did sales. That's because Ruppe had his hand and eyes on both.

Unlike some entrepreneurs who hire and depend on a sales force for orders, Ruppe regards the merchandising of his products one of the most important. Therefore, he fills the slot himself. He personally calls on old accounts, cultivates new ones and remains alert for additional business.

If Ruppe nails down an account, he will fight to keep it. "When I get in, I usually keep the account," he says in a non-bragging way.

He also buys yarn -- millions of pounds of cotton and nylon -- when he figures to get the best break the market will allow. Then he becomes a tough

taskmaster to insure the quality is maintained and overhead kept level.

There's no secret about the way he does business. Ruppe is a conservative thinker who climbed from the lowest job available to the chair that occupies his name today.

"I grew up in these plants," he said. "There's no job I don't know. I mopped floors and cleaned the toilets before my father would allow me to do any-

thing else. Gradually I spent time in the knitting department, worked on knitting machines before working in the office on payroll and invoices.

"The main thing is this. I have worked with these people, my employees. I know them personally, I know their habits and their character. I know the hard workers from those who goof off and we have a relationship. I feel like they can come to me if they have a problem and if I

have to go to them, they know I am fair."

Ruppe is thankful that his father was such a demanding taskmaster.

"Back when I was doing menial things, I thought that because dad owned the company that I should have a more respectful job," he said. "But he knew what he was doing and as he brought me along slowly and in time I learned to appreciate the fact that father indeed, did

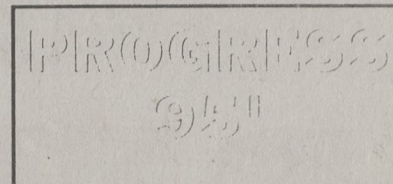
know best."

Ruppe Hosiery began in the early 1960s as Ideal Hosiery Mill in Kings Mountain. George Ruppe was the founder and Dan Ramsey, an uncle, was an important figure in the company for several years.

In 1988 Tony Ruppe entered the hosiery business as an independent producer. But after the death of his father the following year, he acquired the business from his family.

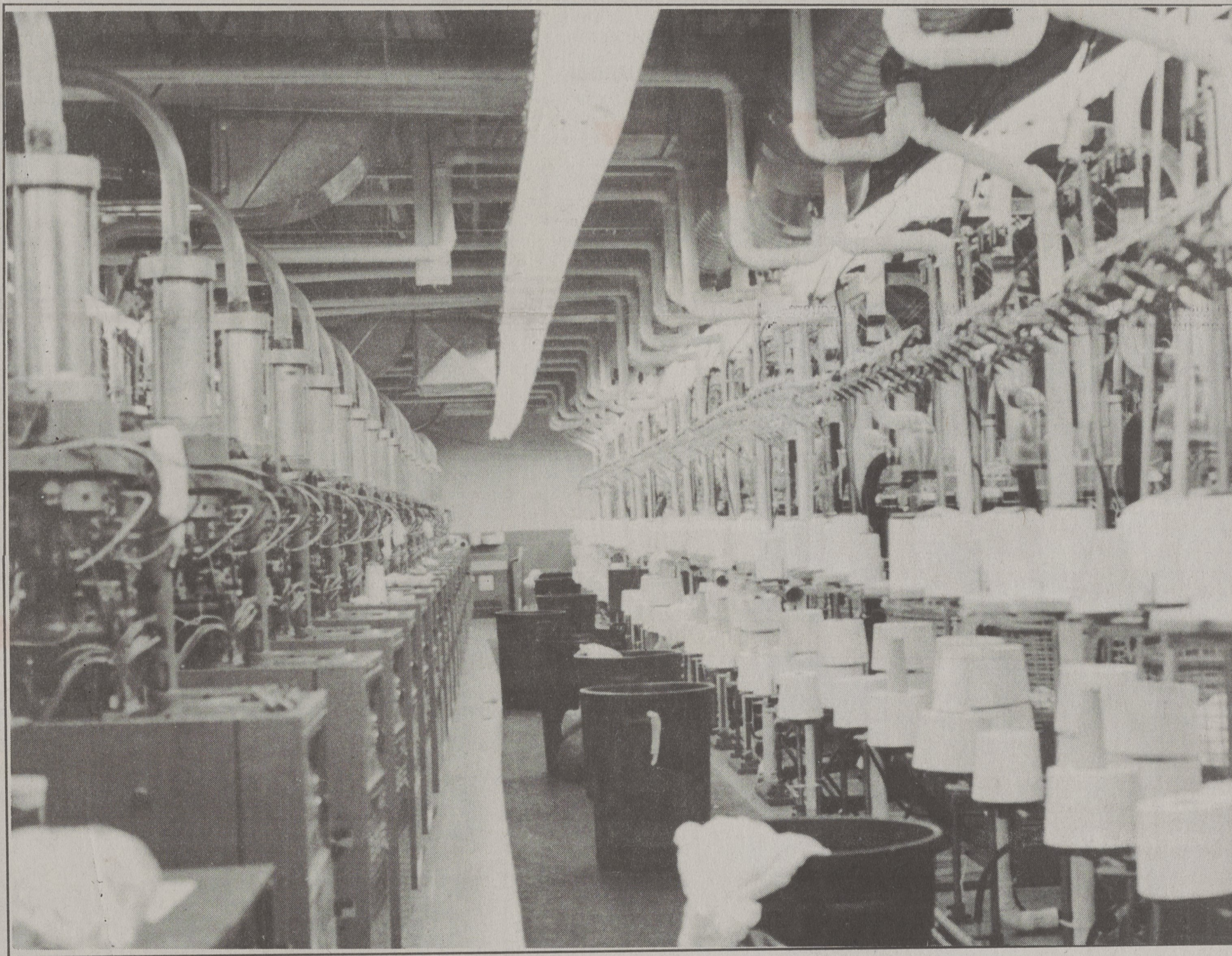
His philosophy of business and life is simple:

"No matter how good you are, somebody is better, he said. "You exist to make a better product. When you do that, you have earned respect, something money can't buy."



RUPPE HOSIERY

Quality Hosiery Knitting



We recognize and have benefited from the leadership that has brought dynamic and continual progress to our area. We are proud to have been a part of that growth. We are looking forward to many more years of pleasant associations.

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