

NEWBURGH HERITAGE

When needles flew in Newburgh

One fact I like to tell those interested in Newburgh's long history of achievements is that we once produced more work clothes than anywhere on earth. The Sweet-Orr Company, known well by our ancestors, employed hundreds at its giant Broadway plant on the corner of Concord Street, as well as its smaller Liberty Street Plant near Gidney Avenue and its original 1871 manufacturing plant in Wappingers Falls. Sweet-Orr made many styles of overalls in denim and some in canvas. They premiered a line of overalls for women who worked on factory lines and were just as endangered by heavy machinery as their male co-workers. They created and marketed blue jeans before anyone, probably even Levis. Over time, they made heavy-duty work jackets too and even added popular lines of casual off-the-job clothes. People think that because they never see or hear about Sweet-Orr products that they went out of business. Old-timers



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know they moved out of Newburgh to the American south for cheaper taxes, utilities and labor – the common saga of northern industry. Yet, Sweet-Orr is still going strong making many kinds of work clothes – in South Africa! It is an exodus story that has been repeated many times.

People will always need the products our local economy once mastered but cheaper ways will always be found to manufacture them. This week, a special broadcast on the apparel industry informed me that the United States now makes less than five percent of the world's clothing. I couldn't believe it! I started digging through industry websites, including the Sweet-Orr Company's marketing from Cape Town. What I discovered was that the

United States is certainly the world's largest market for apparel but trails a very long list of countries that make the clothing we wear, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam, Turkey, India, Cambodia, Indonesia,



The solid Sweet-Orr building on Broadway demolished after the company moved south.

and many of the European Union nations plus the manufacturing leader, China. America created about 7 billion dollars-worth of clothing last year but China created 190 billion.

Just fifty years ago, the City of Newburgh was alive with the hum and click of sewing machines. Walking home from school, our children heard the sounds of clothing being made floating out of the windows of scores of clothing companies. Our mothers, grandmothers and neighbors worked inside those windows pushing cloth along under the flying needles of sewing machines. There was hardly a block of the city where someone skilled in dressmaking couldn't be found to help with an alteration when needed.

I looked back into the mid-century city directories and found the listings of "Clothing Manufacturers." Those old directories are never exhaustive and any business category always had a bit more than is listed. In 1956, I saw the names and addresses of thirty clothing factories. Some were set up in big nineteenth century buildings that had once been machine shops in Newburgh's age of steam.

Others were tucked into smaller spaces also converted from previous enterprises. Vicki Clothing in the 1950's was located inside a brick building that had been constructed as Sweet-Orr's Liberty Street annex. My grandmother had worked there for a time making those old overalls. On Clark Street, a former roller skating rink had become Hudson Coat Company. A trucking warehouse on Chambers Street had become another dress factory. The big 5-story brick building that anchored Smith and Third Street was making infants wear in the 1950's but it had been the headquarters of the prosperous local newspaper, The Newburgh Journal, before the twentieth century. I turned to a city directory a decade later and found that by 1966, there were fewer than 20 clothing manufacturers. The exodus had begun. Newburgh had been able to brag that it supplied Seventh Avenue – the famous and bustling garment district in Manhattan. The folks pushing the racks of dresses and coats down there soon began to move goods that came from farther and farther afield.



In the 1950's, Newburgh women stitched the clothing that outfitted the nation.