

Duquesne textile firm finds sweet dreams in bedding lines

Friday, September 30, 2011

By Steve Twedt, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

Leah Bizzelle flips a newly finished pillow onto the conveyor to be packaged at American Textile Co. The company has introduced sweeping changes to its bedding accessory product lines, incorporating new technologies to enhance traditional bed linens.

Imagine a pillow with a covering that moisturizes your face while you sleep, or one that always smells freshly laundered, or one you can wash 50 times without the insides turning into tennis ball-size lumps.

Those are among the projects coming out of American Textile Co. in Duquesne, which has made its name in bed and pillow coverings that protect from allergens, pollen and mold.

"There are really no other products in the marketplace today that can be washed in hot water and be renewed with each wash," said Blake Ruttenberg, executive vice president for sales and marketing for the family-owned business.

The company's specialty is its Aller-Ease and private label "encasements," the zippered coverings for mattresses, bedsprings and pillows that keep dust mites and bed bugs away.

Today, says Mr. Ruttenberg, American Textile controls 90 percent of that market, and it is one of the top two manufacturers of fiber-filled polyurethane pillows. Their retail clients include Macy's, Target, Kohl's, Sears, Kmart and Wal-Mart.

But a rallying phrase in executive offices, he added, is "growth through innovation" -- which means they're not about to get caught napping in an increasingly competitive market.

Last week, American Textile presented 50 new products to an equal number of retailers and distributors in its New York City showroom, including pillows that moisturize with aloe vera and shea butter, pillows that retain their fresh-out-of-the-dryer smell for weeks and quick-dry pillows that can be washed in hot water. Another pillow has special fibers that keep it feeling cooler through the night.

The company is also rebranding, with less marketing emphasis on allergy protection and more on assuring that everyone in the family who isn't in a crib is sleeping in a healthy environment. This month, American Textile is running a full-page ad in *Good Housekeeping* magazine, targeting wives and mothers.

The company was founded by Mr. Ruttenberg's grandfather, Charles, in 1925. It moved from its Downtown location on Penn Avenue to Lawrenceville in 1950, then to its present location in the RIDC park in Duquesne -- the former site of U.S. Steel's Duquesne Works -- in 2003. Four years later, officials doubled the size of their plant to 200,000 square feet.

Their history is bed coverings but after customers asked them in 2005 to make pillows as well, they moved toward a complete line. Pillow sales took off, prompting company officials to expand to other parts of the country.

They now have 100,000-square-foot pillow manufacturing plants in Salt Lake City and Dallas, and they opened a third in Georgia last spring. Each employs 60 or fewer workers. The company's largest manufacturing plant, with about 275 workers, produces mattress and pillow protectors and mattress pads in El Salvador.

But the headquarters remain in Duquesne, and American Textile has hired many residents for the 275 or so local jobs. The Duquesne workers alone can make and box 5,000 pillows every eight-hour shift; companywide, the workforce produces 50 million units annually.

While the private company doesn't release specific financial results other than to say revenues exceed \$100 million, Mr. Ruttenberg said they expect the business will grow about 30 percent this year. One sector -- pillows and mattress protectors made from fabric that bed bugs can't bite through -- saw a 60 percent increase last summer after bed bug outbreaks in New York City and other places.

And while American Textile can't guarantee that a hotel bed is bed bug free, the company's special suitcase and shoe liners are made to prevent a weary traveler from inadvertently bringing the bugs home.

"Our products," summed up Mr. Ruttenberg, "help people sleep better at night."

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First published on September 30, 2011 at 12:00 am

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