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Mississippi’s Mightiest Start-Ups

Entrepreneurial thinking takes three homegrown companies international.

BY MICHAEL GRABER

These days, Mississippi grows more than just soybeans.

Innovative entrepreneurs in the state have planted thriving, multinational corporations in the same rich, loamy soil that once nurtured Mississippi’s agricultural legacy.

Plenty of international corporations have also come south in recent years to build manufacturing facilities, which positively contribute to the regional economy by adding jobs.

But nothing comes close to the success of the state’s homegrown businesses—the local kids who made good, built their products into household names and whose continuing innovation promotes growth in their communities and has inspired a whole new generation of Mississippi entrepreneurs.

You may have never heard of Mississippi natives Fred Carl, Toxey Haas and Hartley Peavey. But if you’re renovating your kitchen, you probably have your eye on a Viking range. If you like to hunt or just dress the part, you probably own some Mossy Oak camouflage. And if you’ve attended a concert or bar gig in the past 30 years, the sound probably reached your ears courtesy of Peavey Electronics.

WHAT’S COOKING IN GREENWOOD?

WORLD-CLASS KITCHEN DESIGN

Many inventions begin as an act of love. With Viking Range Corporation,
two great passions inspired the initial product that now symbolizes a high-end kitchen: Fred Carl's spouse, Margaret, and their shared love of cooking.

Frustrated with the lack of a professional-grade, high-performance range for his home, Carl—then a contractor—went into his workshop. His solution? Take the powerful features of a commercial range and fit them into a classic, upscale design.

"I was 37 when I built the first Viking stove back in 1985 and almost 39 by the time it went to market. I felt 49," Carl told Inc. magazine in 2006. "I used to tell myself if I can sell 1,000 stoves a year, I'd be doing pretty darn good. We sell that many a week now."

Though the first Viking ranges hit the market in 1987, their innate beauty and standard-setting performance conveyed a much deeper heritage. Carl had created a miraculous hybrid: a new brand imbued with long-standing patina, a defining standard for discerning kitchens. He also created a luxury market for aspiring domestic gourmets and those who want to keep up with them.

Demand quickly outgrew Carl's first supplier. Viking then opened its own manufacturing plant in Carl's native Greenwood, Miss., which eventually grew to four plants, corporate headquarters spanning 12 buildings along the mighty river, a cooking school, spa, boutique hotel and more ventures launching every time you inquire.

The product line grew too, from kitchen appliances to outdoor products, culinary tours and retail stores selling chef-grade cutlery and supplies.

Viking products, most of which are manufactured in Greenwood, are now sold in 80 countries. In turn, the world comes to Viking. Thanks to Carl's company, Greenwood has transformed into a destination for foodies from around the world.
deeply rooted in the dirt and twigs that became our first camouflage pattern.”

After the success of that first pattern, Haas continued to experiment, producing patterns that obscure hunters from prey whether the environment is a leafy tree stand, a grassy duck blind, a snowy field or the leafless, gray woods of late winter.

Haas built Mossy Oak with a staff of close friends who shared his obsession for hunting and love of the outdoors. The first employee, sales guru Bill Sugg, was a hunting buddy who is now president of the company. Mossy Oak also reached out to hunters to build its brand reputation, compiling a professional staff of more than 30 of the country’s best hunters as its brand enthusiasts, including rocker-outdoorsman Ted Nugent.

Over the years, Haas has built a national, multimillion-dollar sporting industry force in West Point, Miss. In addition to licensing its trademark patterns to more than 500 manufacturers of everything from guns to trucks to toothbrushes, the company now produces top-rated outdoor television shows, sells property, publishes a magazine and even hosts a hometown mall.

NEW SOUNDS FROM ROCK ‘N’ ROLL’S BIRTHPLACE
For music lovers, to be a teenager in 1950s Mississippi would’ve been a dream. Great blues musicians were playing small clubs all across the state, while up in Memphis a kid from Tupelo was meshing hillbilly and blues together at Sun Studios to form a sound that would take the world by storm.

In 1957, 15-year-old Halden Peavey drove his ’57 Chevy from his home in Meridian to nearby Laurel to see a Bo Diddley concert, and he decided on the spot to be a rock ‘n’ roll guitar player. His dad, a music store owner, agreed to get him a secondhand acoustic guitar.

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A NEW WORK FORCE

While some states are losing major manufacturing plants, Mississippi is actually going against the trend: Nissan opened a $1.4 billion automotive assembly plant here in 2003, while Toyota has a $1.3 billion plant scheduled to open in 2010. New facilities like these depend on an educated work force, and the state’s universities and colleges have cutting-edge programs to meet the need.

For example, Mississippi State University offers degree programs in industrial technology and has a top-flight college of engineering specifically geared toward serving the state’s largest industries.

Perhaps more significantly, the University of Mississippi and other universities play a large role in incubating new, innovative companies that will become the multinational corporations of tomorrow. "Research conducted at [the University of Mississippi] has led to the creation of 17 new companies in three focus areas based on research strengths at the university: health care, security and sensors, and data management," says Walter G. Chambliss, the director of technology management at the University of Mississippi.

Mississippi State University also grows its own companies via The Thad Cochran Research, Technology and Economic Development Park, which houses a growing number of businesses, university centers and institutes. Meanwhile, the school’s Office of Technology Commercialization identifies, markets and licenses intellectual properties generated on campus.

Far from an exploited, uneducated work force, Mississippi is training itself for the jobs of the future—and creating new ones.

JACOB LAWRENCE
at the MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM OF ART

JACOB LAWRENCE’S MIGRATION SERIES
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January 26 - April 13, 2008

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Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series: Selections from The Phillips Collection was organized by The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. This exhibition has been made possible through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts as part of the American Masterpieces program, with additional support from NotLile Foundation and Henry Luce Foundation.
“The fact is, for reasons I don’t know or understand, Mississippi has more creative people per capita than any other state in the nation.”

—Hartley Peavey

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but balked at the amplifier necessary to take it into rock ‘n’ roll territory.

So Peavey, who had tinkered with rockets, models and machines his whole life, went to the basement and built one. Luckily for the thousands of musicians who depend on Peavey Electronics, he was “the world’s worst guitar player,” he says, and so he focused on building the equipment instead.

With $8,000 borrowed from his dad, Peavey set up shop in 1965 above his father’s old music store, building amplifiers emblazoned with a logo he sketched in his notebook.

More than 40 years later, Peavey Electronics does business under that same logo in 136 countries, building instruments and electronic equipment for the world’s rock stars and garage bands alike—as well as the sound system for the Sydney Opera House in Australia, venues for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the biggest airports in the country, and thousands of other theme parks, stadiums and concert halls.

Peavey employs thousands of people at 33 locations on three continents. But the vision—and continuing innovation—still comes out of little Meridian, Miss., home of the “blue yodeler” Jimmie Rodgers, the father of country music. “The fact is, for reasons I don’t know or understand, Mississippi has more creative people per capita than any other state in the nation,” Peavey says.

“Musicians, authors, artists, you name it. The people here are pioneers,” he adds. “Mississippi has always been at the end of everybody’s list. We’ve been told ‘You can’t do this, you can’t do that.’ ... We’re just crazy enough to say, ‘Maybe we can.”

GIVING BACK

Viking Range, Mossy Oak and Peavey Electronics were all born from a problem—and they all used innovative thinking to discover the solution and take it worldwide. But they haven’t forgotten their hometown roots: Today, all three companies are dedicated to solving problems at home and giving back to their communities.

No Mississippi entrepreneur symbolizes this more than Jim Barksdale, the former Netscape president and CEO who still sits on the board of directors of Time Warner, FedEx and Sun Microsystems. In 2000,
Barksdale and his late wife, Sally, donated $100 million to establish the Barksdale Reading Institute, which is dedicated to increasing literacy by targeting at-risk children in Mississippi public schools.

 Claiborne Barksdale, Jim’s brother, directs the institute and says its mission is critical. “Somewhere from 30 to 35 percent of Mississippi adults are functionally illiterate,” he says. “Our goal is to get all Mississippi children where they need to be in reading skills before they leave the third grade. If they don’t, our research has shown that most of them will never catch up.”

The Barksdale Institute puts specially trained reading coordinators—whose salaries are paid by the institute—in Mississippi schools to work directly with the neediest students. The program has been heralded as groundbreaking and a possible model for other states.

Hartley Peavey was honored by President George H.W. Bush back in 1991 for his work force development initiatives, including job skills programs that trained industrial workers to use computers in the ’80s, giving them skills to succeed later on. Viking and Mossy Oak have contributed to the success of their communities as well, pumping millions into the local economy. Across Mississippi, a new generation of entrepreneurs are benefiting from this example, growing new companies that aim to be the household names of tomorrow.

The Barksdale Reading Institute is dedicated to increasing literacy by targeting at-risk children in Mississippi schools.

Blues, country, rock ’n roll. It all started right here. And on any given night, it’s still going strong. Mississippi’s singers and musicians make juke joints, clubs and concert halls rock. Fans come here from around the world to sit down front and see the real thing – live and a-live, as we say. Novice or connoisseur, you should, too. Call or check out VisitMississippi.org to get your free Mississippi Tour Guide. Then look for the neon, listen for the applause, and come on in for the show.

LIVE FROM THE BIRTHPLACE OF AMERICA'S MUSIC.
HIGH-TECH MISSISSIPPI

For a state with an agricultural reputation, Mississippi has a surprising number of high-tech ventures. The Mississippi Technology Alliance (MTA) serves as the circuit board through which most of the companies in this fast-growing sector connect.

MTA promotes high-tech development in the state, offering services to entrepreneurs and administering the Mississippi Seed Fund and Mississippi Angel Network.

“We are pleased to see that Mississippi has companies with the high-growth, high-performance potential to drive the state’s economy.” —Dr. H. Randall Goldsmith

“The new $4 million Mississippi Seed Fund is stimulating attractive deal-flow for MTA,” says MTA President and CEO Dr. H. Randall Goldsmith. “We evaluate two to three new innovation-based ventures per week representing the pharmaceutical, information technology, geospatial, agriculture and alternative energy sectors. We are pleased to see that Mississippi has companies with the high-growth, high-performance potential to drive the state’s economy in the same tradition of Viking, Peavey and Mossy Oak.”

A few recent successes, of many, include Oxford’s FNC Inc. (fincac.com), which provides real estate collateral workflow systems and predictive analytics to many of America’s largest lending institutions, and Bomgar (bomgar.com), a fast-growing firm that enables remote support of computers. To date, Bomgar has more than 3,000 corporate accounts in more than 40 countries.