

# Paper mates

What's old becomes new again at Jackson Paper's mountain mill.

**S**weat pours off mechanic Rick Crawford at Jackson Paper Manufacturing Co. in downtown Sylva, within walking distance of three breweries, ice cream at Jack the Dipper, quinoa salad at City Lights Cafe and the historic Jackson County courthouse. Tourism may be king now, but the gritty work of papermaking has been part of the town since the 1920s.

The mill is where Jackson Paper president Nicki Slusser feels most at home. She grew up hopping around the South with her mill-worker dad and even worked at one through college at the University of Kentucky, spending the next 34 years helping run some of the nation's biggest plants for industry giants Richmond, Va.-based MeadWestvaco Corp. and Memphis-based International Paper Co., which has 58,000 employees and annual revenue of

\$23.6 billion. She retired in 2012 with plans to live at her mountain home at Lake Logan in Haywood County, until Jackson Paper CEO Tim Campbell, a friend of her father's, asked her to run the mill in Sylva.

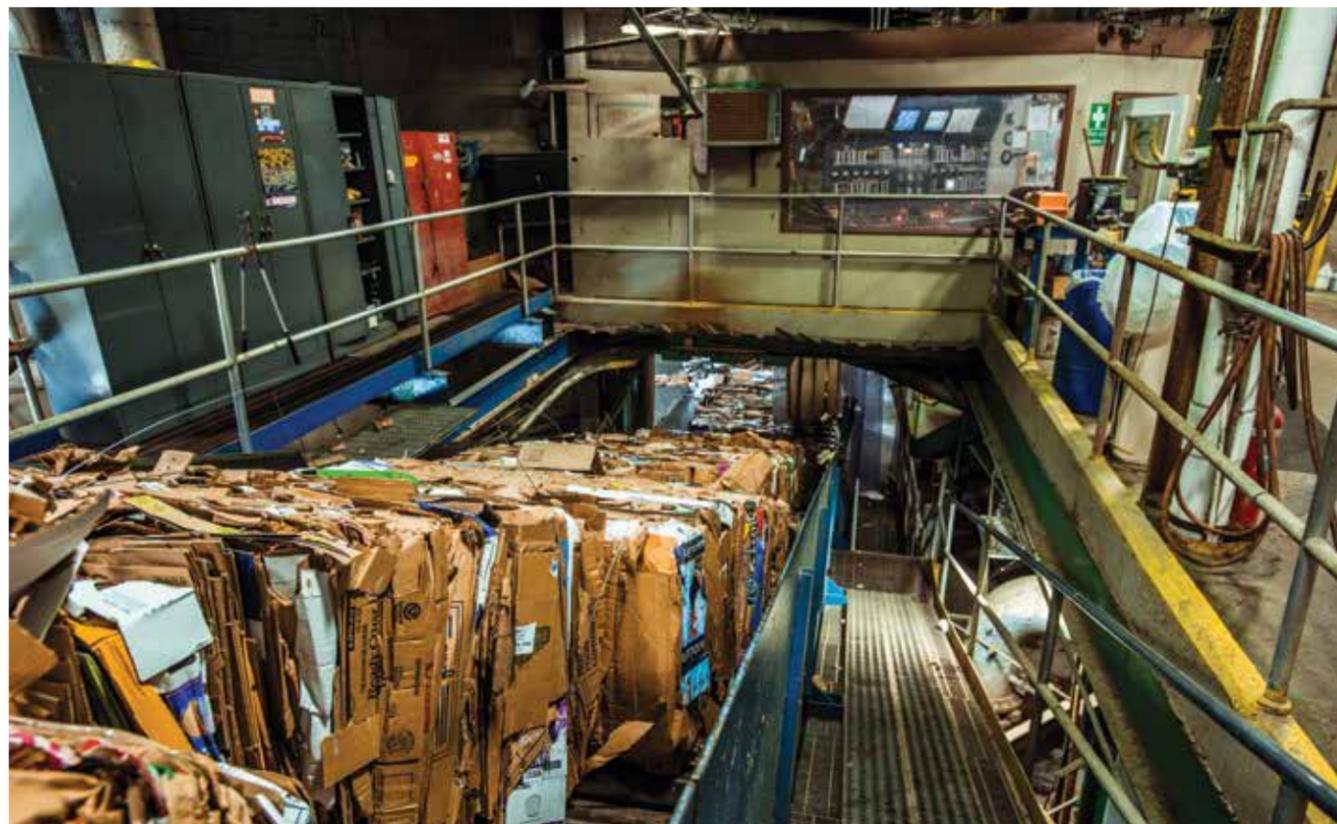
Slusser oversees more than 100,000 tons of paper rolling off Jackson's line every year, bound for customers across the country who use the paper to make corrugated containers, which are then sold to other customers. If you were to take apart a shipping box, sandwiched between the outside liners is a fluted piece of paper. That paper is made in Sylva, though someone else does the bending or corrugating to give it a wavy appearance. In paper speak, it's called corrugated medium, and it's part of the fastest-growing segment of the paper industry. Online deliveries are one reason, but grocery chains and big-box stores such as Wal-



More than 100,000 tons of recycled corrugated containers are trucked in, cleaned and cooked into new sheets of paper every year at Jackson Paper in Sylva.



A machine resembling an enormous blender churns used boxes into pulp, with the help of about 900,000 gallons of recycled water.



A conveyor belt shuttles the boxes, which are removed of dirt, staples and tape before they can be mixed into slurry.

Mart and Costco also ship most of their goods in corrugated containers.

Jackson Paper is one of the smaller plants Slusser has run, but it's one of only three paper mills in the U.S. that does not discharge any waste into surface or municipal water supplies. All of the water Jackson uses — 900,000 gallons at any given time — is recycled. Recycling is the business model here. Bales of used cardboard boxes, arriving daily by tractor-trailer, are turned into clean sheets of paper. It begins with a machine resembling an enormous blender, about 20 feet in diameter, in which boxes plus water are cooked into a slurry that is piped from one building to another housing Jackson's sole paper-making machine. The slurry is then poured onto a continuously moving screen for the laborious process of removing water.

"The process of making paper is mostly about losing water," Slusser says. Jackson's 1927 paper machine, nicknamed "The Mountaineer" in honor of Jackson's mountain heritage, uses gravity, vacuum power

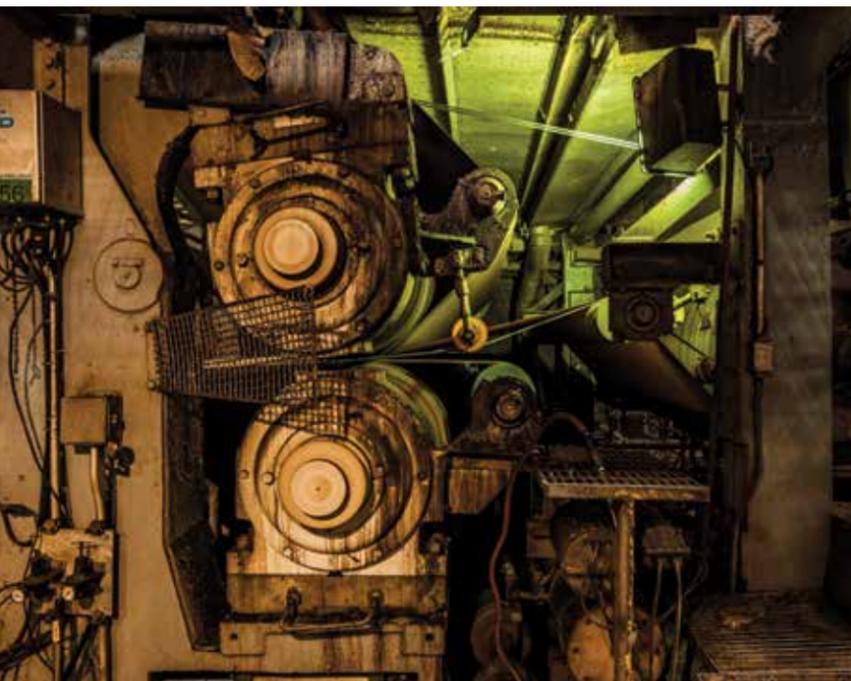


The Plott Balsam mountains are the backdrop to the plant, built as a tannery in 1901.

and steam to dry the slurry. It's the steam that makes mills hot, smelly places to work. Finished dry paper is wound onto large rolls at the end of the machine.

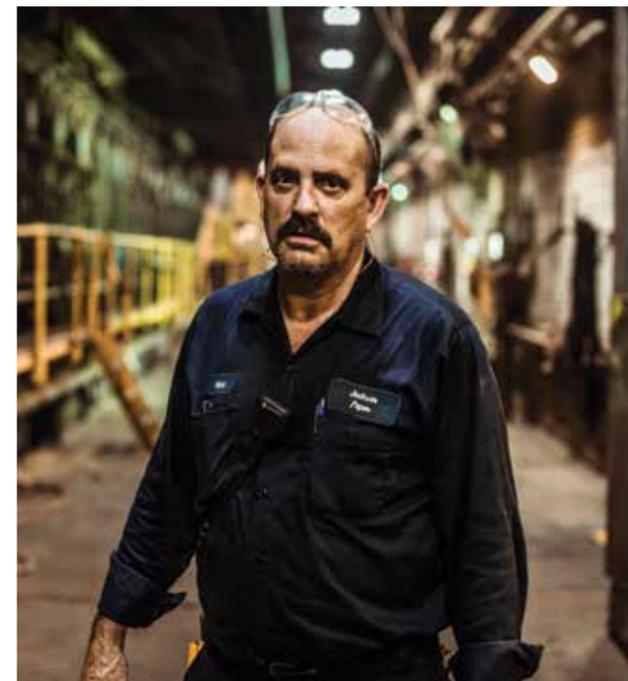


Steam rises as water drains from the pulp on "The Mountaineer," the 1927 paper machine Jackson still uses today.



The heat generated by the paper machine leaves maintenance mechanic Rick Crawford, right, covered in sweat.

Jackson has about 125 employees, many of whom are second- and third-generation papermakers, working in shifts around the clock 365 days a year. The plant has been in the same location since the early 1900s and a paper mill, on and off, since 1927. Larger companies



including MeadWestvaco and Packaging Corp. of America of Lake Forest, Ill., ran the business for many years before co-owners Tim Campbell and Jeff Murphy bought it in 1995.

An economic downturn that closed the plant in the 1970s holds vivid memories for



When Jackson Paper president Nicki Slusser entered the paper industry, she was the only woman at her first mill. That's changing. "More and more women are wanting to do something different. I never had any doubt when I was growing up. I said, 'Shoot, I could do that.'"

Julie Spiro, director of the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce. Her father lost his job at the mill, and she lived with an aunt for a period until the family could get back on its feet financially. "Papermaking is somewhat synonymous with the mountains because the raw materials are here," Spiro says. When it was taken away, "It was so hard on the community."

Today, Spiro estimates that Jackson Paper is the county's fifth-largest employer after Harrah's Cherokee Casino Resort, Western Carolina University, Harris Regional Hospital and the N.C. Department of Transportation. Jackson Paper, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, doesn't disclose its finances, but officials say production has increased by more than 25% over that period because of more efficient use of the same old machinery. ■

— Allison Williams



Finished paper is shipped across the country to customers who use it to make boxes.



Rolls are cut to the customer's desired width, about 20 to 110 inches.

