

NOCONA

Rebirth of a Texas Legend

“The fire destroyed our plant, but our two most valuable assets—our employees and the Nokona name—survived. Both will help us rebuild a new facility.”

by Russell A. Graves



When I walked into the temporary home of the Nokona Athletic Goods Co.’s baseball glove factory in Nocona, Texas, my career as a baseball player had come full circle.

Twenty-two years ago, I was named catcher of the newly formed Dodd City High School baseball team. One of my first orders of business was to prepare my gear.

Coach Reed gave me a brand-new Nokona catcher’s mitt and told me to have it ready for the season. For weeks, I oiled the glove and would throw a ball into it, trying to break in the leather. Living way out in the country, I didn’t always have someone with whom to play catch, so for hours at a time, I’d throw the baseball on the roof of our barn and catch it as it rolled off the eaves—all in preparation for opening day.

All those memories came flooding back as I walked through the front doors of the Nokona factory. Rob Storey, president and chief executive of the company, was my personal tour guide.

It was a tour that almost did not happen. A fire last July destroyed the company’s nearly 80-year-old factory building and warehouse. Fortunately, workers were able to save many of the artifacts that trace the history of the company—and of the sport with which it is so closely identified.

Cad McCall, a local banker, started the business in 1926. “At first, the company made purses, but due to the Great Depression, the company had to change its offerings,” Storey said. In 1934, Nokona’s first glove was released. When the company applied for a patent for its baseball gloves, the United States Patent Office wouldn’t allow the town’s name to be attached to the patent, so a “K” took the place of the “C” in Nocona.

For more than 70 years, the company quietly produced handmade gloves in its old, brick factory just a couple of blocks west of downtown. Nokona has been a mainstay of the local economy and one of Nocona’s major employers.

“One of the company’s guiding principles is to provide jobs for American workers,” Storey beamed. “The company’s commitment to that principle is what’s allowed us to stay in Nocona while other American glove companies have moved their production overseas.”

The Nokona brand, a staple of youth baseball and softball clubs, has occupied a modest but comfortable niche in the American baseball world. But a recent aggressive growth plan brought new investors into the fold. The injection of cash spurred ambitious plans for the company. A marketing campaign, along with the signing of the Chicago Cubs’ Todd Walker (now with the Oakland A’s organization) as an endorser, poised the company for growth.

The July fire threatened this progress, consuming the building within a few hours. But the dies (tools used to create pieces of the gloves), which had been



Cam Washington plays outfield and catcher for the Childress High School Bobcats.

around since the company was formed, were salvaged, as was some memorabilia and critical computer data.

“In the end, the fire burned down the factory but not the company,” Storey said.

Within days after losing its building, the company announced plans to rent 20,000 square feet at the former Nocona Boot Factory on the eastern edge of town. Back orders had grown to 10,000. Just shy of two months after the fire, the first glove was produced and presented to New York Yankees Manager Joe Torre.

While many CEOs would view a devastating fire as a setback, Storey sees it as a way to become bigger and better.

“We are continuing to market the company heavily and have signed even more major leaguers to represent our gloves. This factory is temporary, and we will definitely rebuild,” he vowed. “The fire destroyed our plant, but our two most valuable assets—our employees and the Nokona name—survived. Both will help us rebuild a new facility.”

Russell A. Graves is an award-winning photographer and frequent contributor to Texas Co-op Power.