

Colshire of California, alias 'the pajama factory,' marks 20th year here

By ANN CONY

Colshire of California, commonly but erroneously referred to as the "pajama factory," is celebrating its 20th year of business in Watsonville.

Colshire hasn't made a pair of pajamas in three years, but Sears, Roebuck & Co. is still the Watsonville manufacturer's biggest customer, as it was when the plant opened in 1960.

The factory now makes lingerie, loungewear and sportswear, not because people have stopped wearing pajamas but because Colshire, like other domestic pajama makers, was undercut by Asian competitors. The transition from pajamas to the tremendous variety of garments now made by Colshire was not easy. New operations were instituted and "it took a fantastic amount of cooperation from the employees," recalls Stan Meyer, manager of Colshire since 1963.

About half of the company's finished product winds up at Sears stores nationwide. The other half is contracted for by Farr West of Palo Alto and other companies from cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles.

"You know there's a funny thing about contracting," says Meyer. "You spend a lot of time on the phone, but there's never a (written) contract." The paperwork doesn't materialize until shipping.

Contracting is cut-throat business.

"There's an old industry saying, 'You don't contract with your mother unless you're on very good terms with her,'" Meyer says.

"Fortunately, we're more independent of contractors than most companies like us."

Sears and the contractors Colshire works with send the factory here everything it needs to make the clothing, except thread: all the fabrics are shipped from the East Coast and contractors also supply the pattern designs.

Inside the 45,000-square-foot factory at 1504-B Freedom Blvd. off Blanca Lane, anywhere from 130 to 180 employees transform endless bolts of fabric into neatly sewn garments.

The fabrics are laid out on 72-yard-

long tables in layers that vary from 36 to 300 ply, depending on the thickness of the material. Pattern pieces are carefully arranged to assure a minimum of waste and men who are paid by the hour guide razor-sharp electric fabric cutters.

Women — the vast majority of Colshire's employees — are paid a piece rate to stitch the fabric pieces together on heavy-duty industrial sewing machines in a highly specialized assembly-line system.

It's a union shop — has been pretty much since the beginning — with employees represented by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

Meyer says the company enjoys a good relationship with employees. It is primarily for their morale, he says, that the company periodically buys full-page ads in the Register-Pajaronian, despite the fact that it doesn't sell directly to the public.

When Meyer first came to work for Colshire, though, the turnover rate was atrocious. He attributed it to a combination of poor management and the extremely transient nature of the work force in the early days.

"We don't have much of a turnover anymore," Meyer says, adding that at least half the employees now have been at Colshire for more than five years.

It would be tough for anyone to accuse Colshire of discrimination in its hiring practices with a work force more than sprinkled with Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Mexican and Filipino faces.

It takes a new seamstress between three and six months to become proficient on the machines. What Colshire calls a "normal" rate of work yields the women \$4.41 an hour, but wages for the fastest, most skilled sewers come close to \$6 an hour, according to one employee.

Besides Sears, shoppers see Colshire's products in Ford's Department stores and in a number of smaller shops in Santa Cruz County. Meyer says the company doesn't make money on the garments sold directly to small stores, but does it

anyway as a good-will gesture to the local community.

Colshire's competition comes from Mexico, Los Angeles, the southeastern United States and overseas. Meyer says Colshire stacks up well against the competition in its new markets.

"The only way we stay in business is on our ability to make quick delivery and our ability to handle all fabrics and designs," Meyer says.

Colshire's parent company is the Michael Berkowitz Co. of Pennsylvania.

Berkowitz was a Russian immigrant, son of a poor Jewish family who sent Michael to the U.S. with its life savings when he was 14 in 1885. The young Berkowitz arrived penniless in New York and went to work in the sweatshops there.

Hardworking, able and ambitious, Berkowitz, joined later by his brothers, went into the subcontracting business at the age of 22, hiring others to make the garments.

About the turn of the century, he was known as "king of the neckband makers." (Detachable shirt collars were the style in those days.)

Soon afterwards, Michael and his brothers got into the shirt manufacturing business and acquired the then-famous Columbia Shirt Co. During World War II, Columbia converted to the manufacture of women's Army Corps uniforms.

When the war ended, Berkowitz had lost his shirt market. It was then that he went to pajamas.

The name Columbia Shirt Co. was condensed to Colshire.

On the local scene, a corporation called Pajaro Valley Industries formed in 1959 to finance the opening of the factory in Watsonville. The corporation sold stock at \$100 a share. The factory was built by Rosewall Construction and Pajaro Valley Industries then leased the building to Colshire on a 20-year term with the option to buy, which the Berkowitz interests did this year.

With its raison-d'être gone, Pajaro Valley Industries is now dissolving and investors will soon be turning in their stock for cash.

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Women at sewing machines (above) stitch lace appliques, darts, hems, buttonholes and everything else that goes into a garment while Carlos Lopez (right) cuts fabric and interfacing with a motorized hand tool.

