

# Dirty shirt? Some are dyeing to get one

BY CATHY JETT  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Most people use washing machines to remove dirt.

Not Rusty Pearson and Adam Conrath.

Virginia T-Shirt Company's partners dump dirt—actually Fredericksburg-area red clay—into a washing machine to create their new line of Virginia Original Red Clay Apparel T-shirts and hoodies.

“It’s not a clean process by any means,” Pearson said as he used a hose to pour a slurry of the stuff over a load of pristine white cotton hoodies last week.

The garments soak, agitate and spin in the washing machine long



**Original Virginia Red Clay Shirts are available for sale at The Card Cellar downtown. The apparel is stained with real, local red clay.**

enough for the iron oxide in the clay to permanently stain them a rusty red, a process that can take three to five hours.

Then they’re washed twice more in progressively cleaner water, dried and stamped with the Virginia Original

Red Clay Apparel logo that Conrath designed.

Virginia T-Shirt Company, which is based in Hartwood, sells the line on its website, vatshirt.com; The Card Cellar in downtown Fredericksburg; Earth, Glaze & Fire in Warrenton; and La Bee da Loca in Culpeper. It’s also available through Amazon.com.

“It sells itself pretty much because it’s so unique,” Conrath said.

He and Pearson came up with the dirt shirt idea last year while kicking around possibilities for expanding their part-time business after Pearson, an Army veteran, retired as the Fort Belvoir Fire Depart-

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# SHIRTS

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ment's assistant fire chief last October. They'd seen the Original Red Dirt Shirt in Hawaii and parts of the Southwest, and thought that concept held promise. Pearson then plunged into research.

He discovered that this area's red clay is high in iron oxide, and thought that the science aspect of using it as a natural dye was cool. But he wasn't sold until he ran across a quote that he found by noted American historian and magazine editor Richard M. Ketchum.

"If any land in America deserves to be called hallowed ground," Ketchum said, "it is the red clay soil of Virginia on which so much of this nation's past is preserved."

Using some of that "hallowed ground" as dye, Pearson and Conrath, realized, would add a historical dimension to the new apparel line.

Figuring out exactly how to do that took some trial and error. The first batches were made using a five-gallon bucket in Pearson's kitchen.

"We had to find the right blend of material," Pearson said. "Every thread absorbs the dye a different way."

His wife eventually told him he had to get the operation out of their house. He and Conrath, who also has a day job working for the federal government, have a setup in an office building off Warrenton Road. They plan to look for a large space and more washing machines once their lease is up.

Right now, they're using a single washing machine hooked up to three 50-gal-



PETER CIEHLKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

**Rusty Pearson fills a washing machine with dye made from red clay at the Original Virginia Red Clay Shirts Stafford County production site.**



**The Virginia T-Shirt Company makes and sells a line of apparel called Original Virginia Red Clay Shirts.**

lon blue plastic tanks. Red clay gets sifted through two white plastic colanders to remove rocks. It's then mixed with water to make a slurry and dumped into one of the tanks.

"A pound of clay is enough to do 100 shirts," Pearson said.

Slurry from the first tank gets poured over half

of the garments in the washer, and then the rest are added. Once they've absorbed enough of the natural dye, water from the other two tanks is used to finish removing the remaining clay. The three-step process creates garments that will eventually fade to a soft shade of rust with repeated washings.

Lori Shoup, Conrath's sister, came up with the idea of tying each piece with twine to complement their rustic look. The attached tag gives washing instructions.

Pearson and Conrath sold the first shirts online, but customers kept saying that they wanted to find them locally. They approached Burt Goldberg, owner of The Card Cellar at 915 Caroline St., about being the exclusive vendor in Fredericksburg. He placed an order two weeks before Christmas, and said that he's already had to reorder.

"People like the uniqueness of it," Goldberg said. "The fact that it's done locally is pretty popular."

He said that one customer bought one for her father as a Christmas present because he'd worn out a dirt shirt he'd purchased out west.

"It was the perfect gift for her father because it was a local one," Goldberg said. "It's the novelty that gets people, but they're actually very comfortable."

The Card Cellar will continue carrying shirts with the Virginia Original Red Clay Apparel because it already stocks a number of Fredericksburg-themed T-shirts, he said. But Pearson and Conrath can localize the clay and the logo for other businesses.

Shirts and hoodies made for the Potomac Nationals when they move to Fredericksburg, for example, could be dyed with red clay dug up when the stadium is being built, Pearson said.

"I would love to have our brand grow," he said, "and have customers understand that it's not just a cool shirt, but what the dirt represents."

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# City's go-to garden center will be gone after spring

BY CATHY JETT  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

For 90 years, Roxbury Farm & Garden Center has been the place where locals go to buy grass seed for their lawns, plants to perk up their landscape, and feed for their livestock, pets and the birds that flock to their feeders.

But the popular independent business at the corner of Lafayette Boulevard and Jackson Street in Fredericksburg has seen sales slowly decline ever since the recession hit in 2008. It will be stocked for spring, but will close once everything is sold.

"This is really heartbreaking for me," said Bill Crawley, a longtime customer and University of Mary Washington professor emeritus. "If you're a gardener, that's where you go. Seriously, if they don't have it, you don't need it. They have so



**Roxbury has been a big part of general manager Andy Lynn's life. His parents managed the downtown store after a local group bought the business in 1973.**

many specialty products that you simply can't get anywhere else. I don't know what gardeners in this area are going to do

without Roxbury."

Andy Lynn, Roxbury's gregarious general manager, said a number of factors convinced

the owners that they needed to wind down the business. For starters, the farm and garden center is facing more competition than ever at a time when fewer people have big lawns and backyard gardens.

Big developers have largely replaced the small local developers who'd buy grass seed and other supplies at Roxbury. And last year's unseasonably cold spring weather and record rainfalls also took a toll.

"I think our sales for September were 60 percent of what they'd normally be," Lynn said. "It's just the perfect storm. Time to go. Time to go."

Roxbury Farm & Garden Center got its start as Roxbury Mills in 1929 when A.L. Brulle moved his business from the Roxbury mill at Thornburg, where the Brulles had been milling flour and making chairs

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# ROXBURY

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since the 1890s, to the 400 block of Lafayette Boulevard in 1929. He opened Roxbury Mills there as a feed store, and it became one of the largest grain purveyors in the region by the mid-1900s.

“You could buy everything for farm use,” said Price “Rudy” Jett of Stafford County, who started going there more than 50 years ago to buy seed corn, orchard grass seed and mash for his laying hens. Back then, he said, mash cost \$2 for 100 pounds.

A fire destroyed the original building in 1968, and the company moved into a smaller space at 632 Kenmore Ave. A group of local business people got together to buy the business in 1973 from the Brulle family.

Henry Lynn, who’d been a feed salesman, and wife Sunny Lynn managed the store. Son Andy Lynn remembers how they competed with Fredericksburg Hardware and Southern States by staying open longer. All three were closing at noon Wednesdays and Saturdays because staffers had farm chores. His father decided to stay open until 1 p.m.

“They all said, ‘Are you crazy?’ but nobody changed their hours,” Andy Lynn said.

What really put the business “on the road map,” his said, was the fortuitous purchase of 25 tractor-trailer loads of fertilizer in 1973. Members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries or the OAPC, started an oil embargo that March and didn’t lift it for a year. Oil is one of the ingredients in fertilizer, and Roxbury became the only place locals could get the soil supplement.

“Who knows? We might not have made it without that,” he said.

Roxbury bought the building that now houses the retail end of the business and the brick warehouse behind it in 1977. Both had belonged to the Edgar M. Young Lumber Co., which closed in 1967.

The business expanded in 1986 with the purchase of the vacant field Wilson Brothers had used as a lumberyard and the old Fredericksburg Spoke Works warehouse next door. The warehouse, which



A mural decorates the Jackson Street side of Roxbury.



A variety of seeds line a shelf at Roxbury, known for its inventory.

was built in 1903, now houses pallets of seed and the machine Roxbury uses to grind corn for feed.

Lynn said his father realized that Roxbury needed to diversify and add a greenhouse because the business wasn’t going to make it selling feed. Henry Lynn located a greenhouse in Tappahannock in 1987, and sent his son and another employee down there to disassemble it and bring it back.

Everything was going well, Andy Lynn recalled, until they pulled up one of the supports and disturbed some hornets.

“We got away with our lives,” he said, a grin lighting up his face. “I doubt we could run that fast today.”

As the farms that once surrounded Fredericksburg began sprouting subdivisions, Roxbury diversified and started doing business as Roxbury Farm & Gar-

den Center. Customers could still find feed and seed, but they could also buy such things as bedding plants, gardening tools and supplies to make beer and wine.

Sales increased, and the opening of Lowe’s in Central Park in 1995 and Home Depot in Gateway Village didn’t slow them down, Lynn said. In 2001, the Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce named the company the Business of the Year in the greater than 15 employees category.

“We were rocking along,” Lynn said.

Patrons could also turn to Roxbury’s employees, many of whom are Master Gardeners, for advice about what to plant and what to do if the plants don’t thrive. Judy Rowland, who manages the greenhouse, said that it’s not uncommon to get phone calls from people who start out by saying

they didn’t buy a plant from Roxbury, but figured that she’d know the solution to whatever problem it had.

That’s one of the many ways the company has given back to the community over the years, Lynn said. It used to lend the city straw bales to line William Street for the annual Soap Box Derby before the event moved to Dominion Raceway in Thornburg last year, and didn’t charge if they were returned undamaged. It’s offered the same deal on plants to a number of organizations, and let them hold special events on its grounds.

“They’ve been wonderful community partners,” said Jane Shelhorse, the Fredericksburg Parks, Recreation and Facilities Department’s director.

She said that she’ll be sorry to see Roxbury close because Lynn and his staff also always have offered the department good advice and helped the city get good deals.

“That’s where I go, too,” Shelhorse said.

Lynn said that most of his 14-member staff had realized that Roxbury’s days were numbered, but a few were still shocked when he let them know recently that the business would be closing.

Rowland, who’s worked for the company for 20 years, said that she’d hoped to retire from the company in 2022. She said that she’ll miss the camaraderie among the staff, who’ve been known to engage in water fights and play practical jokes on Lynn, as well as the customers and vendors she’s gotten to know well over the years.

“So many memories,” she said, trying hard not to cry.

Lynn said that Roxbury’s buildings and property will probably be sold once the business shutters.

“This is going to be heartbreaking for lots and lots of people,” said Bill Micks, co-owner of the Virginia Outdoor Center off Fall Hill Avenue.

He said that he can’t remember a time when he didn’t go to Roxbury to buy bird seed or pick out a Christmas tree.

“I think Roxbury is one of those places that the community needs to save,” he said. “It’s a magical place.”

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Chick-fil-A's most popular  
sauce originated in  
Spotsylvania County.

BY CATHY JETT

# HONEY OF AN IDEA



**H**ugh Fleming never named the wildly popular sauce he created out of necessity in the early 1980s for his Chick-fil-A store in what is now the Spotsylvania Towne Centre.

Back then, customers called it everything from “that special sauce” to “Mr. Fleming’s sauce,” and were known to get cranky if the tangy, honey-mustard concoction with a smoky hint of barbecue flavor wasn’t available.

Today, they ask for it by its official title: Chick-fil-A sauce.

“We’re very proud and grateful for Chick-fil-A for naming the sauce after his concoction,” said Todd Fleming, Hugh’s son and owner of the Chick-fil-A in Central Park.

Hugh Fleming gave the recipe to the Atlanta-based company in appreciation when he retired 11 years ago. It was a thank you for all the help it had given him and his family since he opened his first franchise nearly 40 years ago in the mall.

“I could never have developed it without being under the Chick-fil-A roof,” Fleming told *The Free Lance-Star* in a 2008 article. “It was, as far as I was concerned, a shared credit, as far as making it successful. It was my way of paying the company back.”

Chick-fil-A had its eye on Fleming’s sauce for years, largely because local customers would ask for it at the company’s other restaurants and be disappointed because it wasn’t available.

But its first stab at commercializing Fleming’s handmade sauce in 2004 didn’t turn out like the original. Called Honey Roasted BBQ Sauce, it was tweaked and made thicker so it



File / *The Free Lance-Star*

Hugh Fleming, longtime operator of Chick-fil-A restaurants in the region, created a new sauce more than 20 years ago. The company eventually began serving the sauce in Chick-fil-A’s nationwide.

would stay on the chain’s char-grilled chicken sandwiches.

“We knew immediately that it wasn’t close enough for people to be happy about it,” said Todd Fleming. “It’s not a bad substitute, but it’s not the same thing.”

The original golden yellow sauce, which Chick-fil-A now faithfully reproduces—is thinner, more like a dipping sauce. Longtime area customers dunk nuggets and fries in it, and even drizzle it on salads.

Years later, the reaction still amazed Hugh Fleming, especially since the crowning touch to the recipe was a complete accident.

He created the first batch of sauce back in 1983 because customers were clamoring for a dipping sauce for Chick-fil-A’s popular nuggets. Back then, the restaurant sold chicken nuggets plain. Fleming concocted a sauce by tweaking a honey mustard salad dressing recipe that a fellow entrepreneur from Atlanta shared with him.

At least one ingredient was unintentional. An employee eating nuggets accidentally mixed in barbecue sauce with

the special sauce. He raved about the taste so much that barbecue sauce became a staple ingredient.

Soon, customers were clamoring for the sauce. To keep up with demand, Fleming streamlined the recipe by using Chick-fil-A’s cole slaw dressing as one of the ingredients, and staff would use a giant Hobart commercial mixer to make it in 5-gallon batches at least three times a day.

Customers would pump it from a plastic container into serving-size cups, and some filled soda cups they’d rinsed out in the restroom. At one point, Fleming sold the sauce by the jar during the Christmas season.

Today, Chick-fil-A sauce is the most popular of the company’s eight condiments. The chain said that in 2017 alone, its locations ordered more than 500 million packets of the sauce Fleming created in Spotsylvania.

Todd Fleming said that when he tells people that it originated here, “they’re actually kind of proud, and make that part of their Fredericksburg claim to fame.”