Pedagogical Narrative

Blanche Willis, the Uprising of ’34, and life outside the margins of the mill

The story of the Uprising of ’34 contains many important subplots and concurrent narratives, all centrally situated in some of the biggest stories of the day. The strike affected thousands of people across the country, at a time when personal economic suffering was as common as it would ever be in American history. It was not just people who worked in the mill who were affected by the strike. People who lived and worked in the cities and towns where mills were located were also affected as were people who supplied raw materials to mills and purchased their finished products. This narrative will trace the strike and reflect on pedagogy through a broad lens, centrally focused on a person who was outside the margins of the mill named Blanche Willis. Through the story of Willis, we will consider the pedagogical implications of relevant curricular aspects of the Uprising of ’34. These implications will be highlighted as themes and at the end of this narrative suggested activities and resources related to these themes will be presented.

Blanche Willis was born in Kannapolis, North Carolina an emerging textile mill town in the early 1920s. As a black woman in the American South, she was limited at birth with regard to her opportunities for schooling and later for work. This condition was a lingering consequence of the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War. Students need to understand how slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction left a legacy which impacted the South for generations (THEME 1). Certainly, Blanche Willis’ life choices were impacted by historical events.

Ironically, Blanche would have few opportunities to study about these historical forces. After 8th grade, she dropped out of school to go to work. The dropout rate in the 1930s was over sixty percent (for an overview of dropout rates see http://www.sedl.org/rural/atrisk/rates.html). Blanche was not alone; in the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of children were dropping out of school each year to go to work, many of them in unregulated working environments. In 1933, under the National Industrial Recovery Act (Codes of Fair Competition), the minimum age for industrial employment was set at 16 and in certain dangerous occupations the age limit was 18. But, the law was hard to enforce and in fact was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1935. Prior to this law, there were attempts in 1916 and 1918 at federal child labor regulations, but both laws were struck down by the Supreme Court. It was not until the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that a national child labor law was upheld by the courts. Students need to understand the history of child labor reform and can study this important topic when learning about the Uprising of 1934 (THEME 2).

Blanche did not work in the textile mill industry until she was in her fifties. Prior to this, she was a washerwomen and housekeeper. Black women were often not allowed to work in mills and black men could only work in certain mill jobs. This job selectivity enabled whites, particularly in the South, to limit competition for jobs and keep the higher paying jobs for themselves. It is important for students to understand how deeply stratified the work place and society was in the 1920s and 1930s (THEME 3). While teachers tend to focus on the low standard of living which resulted from mill work, we sometimes disregard the even lower standard of living endured by those who could not even get into the mill. We must remember that mill workers who struck in the Uprising of 1934 were seeking a 40 hour week and regulated pay, but those mostly black individuals who were unable to get mill jobs were lucky to work less than 60 hours and often made less than a dollar a day.

Although Blanche did not work in the mills in Kannapolis during the Uprising of 1934, her soon to be husband did. He worked, as Blanche describes it in her interview, in the “coal chute,” as a janitor, and boxing up finished goods (see the Uprising of ’34 lesson and the related digital historical resources fro this interview). Blanche’s husband (we do not know his name) was unable to work in the higher paying machine jobs until after World War II. Life in textile mills went far beyond just working the looms to include all levels of social and economic activity. Mill villages and surrounding communities were interwoven into the fabric of mill life. Students should understand how working life
shaped society during this time (THEME 4). Blanche talks about living in small communities that were outside the actual mill owned villages. As students begin to see the complexity of life in mill communities they will understand more the causes and effects of the Uprising of 1934.

Additional information and resources

THEME 1 – The impact of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction

It is impossible to overstate how American life has taken form around the story of slavery. Slavery was the defining characteristic of southern culture prior to the Civil War. Slavery in the words of historians William Thomas and Edward Ayers “shaped events in the geopolitical crisis that brought on the American Civil War.” The racism which supported and justified slavery in the South shaped post-bellum segregated American society. We live today with continued racial, social, and economic inequality, almost all of which is a direct consequence of slavery and racial segregation. How do we get students to understand this pattern?

One excellent advanced resource on slavery and the Civil War is William Thomas and Edward Ayers’ “The Difference Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two Communities”
http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR/

The Library of Congress has an interesting online exhibit titled “Reconstruction and Its Aftermath” which looks at how Reconstruction influenced the lives of freed slaves and how the promise of Reconstruction was largely unfulfilled, available at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart5.html

“The History of Jim Crow,” available at http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/ is a well organized high visual multimedia collection focused on segregation in post-bellum America.

THEME 2 – Child Labor

The history of child labor is dramatic and emotional, and some of the best resources for teaching about child labor reform are visual. One of these visual resources is work of Lewis Hine, a photographer for the National Child Labor Committee. The most complete online collection of Lewis Hine’s photographs are available at the Library of Congress - http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html In order to access the images, search on the exact phrase “Hine, Lewis Wickes, 1874 1940, photographer.” This should result in access to thousands of Hine photographs.

Two federal efforts to limit child labor, the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916 and the National Labor Relations Act of 1938 are available at http://www.ourdocuments.gov These presentations are highly visual, well documented and well explained. Other legislative efforts including the 1918 Child Labor Law and the successful Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 are also available online. There are hundreds of web-based resources relating to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), as it continues to define the legal bounds for labor law. The FLSA established a national minimum wage, guaranteed overtime pay, and limited most employment of minors. It has been altered many times, most recently in 2004.


THEME 3 – Social stratification
The Progressive movement in American politics sought in part to address the social and economic inequalities which emerged from the rapid industrialization in the United States. While some progress was made in the form of trust-busting, public schooling, and limited labor reform, inequalities continued to grow throughout the early part of the 20th Century. Students can study these social dynamics by engaging a range of secondary and primary sources available online.

“America in the 1930s” is a wide-ranging collection of resources relevant to the study of life in the 1930s – available at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/front.html. Many of these resources can be used to help students explore social conditions in the 1930s.

The “New Deal Network” is an educational guide to the New Deal period and is sponsored by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. The website has an abundance of available resources all available at http://newdeal.feri.org/.

THEME 4 – The impact of the mill

The social history of textile mill life has been a vibrant research area for several years. Two scholarly projects in this area are available online. Jim Leoudis’ companion teaching website for Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s, Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World is available at http://www.theaha.org/tl/LessonPlans/nc/Leloudis/cover.html. G. C. Waldrep’s Southern Workers and the Search for Community is available online at http://www.press.uillinois.edu/epub/books/waldrep/. The Leoudis’ resource is wide ranging and can be adapted for student use in the classroom. Waldrep’s book might be less applicable, but still represents a good source on mill life for teachers and advanced students.

Topic: General Textile Strike of 1934 and Conditions in Textile Mills and Villages

Subject: Georgia Studies and U.S. History

Note: This full lesson will take two more than two hours to complete, but it is presented in such a way so that it can be easily adapted.

Activities:

- Introduction and Opening
- Activity 1 – People in the past: Understanding personal experiences related to the Uprising of ‘34
- Activity 2 – Settling the strike
- Activity 3 - Letters to FDR
- Activity 4 – Collage on the strike
- Activity 5 – Photo analysis of experiences during strike
- Activity 6 - Similes about the strike
- Activity 7 - Journal writing
- Activity 8 - Newspaper analysis

Objectives:

1. Students will gain an understanding of the working and living conditions for textile mill workers in the first three decades of the Twentieth Century (Activity 1).
2. Students will synthesize primary and secondary source material to create a snapshot of life in a Georgia textile mill village (Activity 1).

3. Students will use a variety of primary resources to create a first-person description and facilitate a discussion of what it would have been like to work in the factor system (Activity 1).

4. Students will gain an understanding of the factors that could cause a failure of compromise between management and workers (Activity 2).

5. Students will perceive the short- and long-term effects of the strike on workers and owners (Activity 2).

6. Students will identify the major causes for the General Textile Strike of 1934 (Activity 2).

7. Students will consider the effects of varying power relationships in a labor dispute (Activity 2).

8. Students will assess the historical significance of the 1934 General Textile Strike in Georgia. (Activity 2).

QCCs:

Georgia Studies
#30 Topic: "New South" Manufacturing
#31 Topic: Segregation
#32 Topic: Economics
#52-60 Topic: Information Processing

U. S. History
#30 Topic: Social Change
#31 Topic: Economic Depression
#32 Topic: New Deal Reforms
#41, #43, #44, #45, #47, #51, and #52 Topic: Skill Development
Bibliography


Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life: Impossible Participation or Power as the Sum of Constraints* Available online at [http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/all/pub_contents/5](http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/all/pub_contents/5)

Activities relating to the General Textile Mill Strike of 1934

Introduction and Opening

In his book *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*, G. C. Waldrep III writes about life in Spartanburg County, South Carolina textile mill villages. By the 1930s, Waldrep reports that Spartanburg County had 30 mill villages “each with its accompanying village: store, churches, school, fraternal lodges, residential neighborhoods, and baseball team—in short, its own unique little world.” Thousands of mill villages across America reflected these social and communal patterns. To open this activity and connect the subject matter of this lesson to your local community, read Chapter 1 of Waldrep’s book [http://www.press.uillinois.edu/epub/books/waldrep/01.html](http://www.press.uillinois.edu/epub/books/waldrep/01.html) and try to imagine similarities between Waldrep’s descriptions and a mill community close to where you teach. If you are unsure of any mill villages in your community, try to conjure up images of mill life in some place which is familiar to you or your students. Describe this real or imagined local mill village to students and ask them to use a creative means to represent social life in the village. Students might want to draw a picture or write a short poem or story. The purpose of the activity is to get students thinking about the subject matter, so it should not be necessary to spend more that 10 minutes on this activity.

This lesson is actually comprised of several short activities. To complete any of the following activities the students will most likely require a brief background lecture on the growth and organization of textile mills including living and working conditions in mill villages. To aid in the development of a background lecture, we have collected excerpts from several sources on the strike along with questions for students. These excerpts are available in Lesson Resources section of this lesson. The Work n Progress website includes many photographs that can be used to supplement the lecture. For an alternative to the brief lecture, consider using segments of the film “Uprising of ’34” at their discretion. This documentary video was produced by Judith Helfand in 1995 and is available from First Run Icarus, [http://www.frif.com/cat97/t-z/the_upri.html](http://www.frif.com/cat97/t-z/the_upri.html) or 800-876-1710. A brief teacher’s guide for using the video is available on the First Run Icarus website at the link above.

Additional background on the General Textile Strike of 1934 is also available from the teaching companion website for Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* contains a good overview to the strike. This brief reading is available online at [http://www.theaha.org/tl/LessonPlans/nc/Leloudis/protest.html#general](http://www.theaha.org/tl/LessonPlans/nc/Leloudis/protest.html#general) This passage is brief enough to read in class at the start of this part of the lesson. Below are a few specific questions which might be useful in following up on this reading and the background reading available in this lesson.

- Who was involved in the strike?
- Where and when did the strike take place?
- What were the opposing positions in this conflict?
- What was the role of President Franklin D Roosevelt in the strike?

As an extension, ask the students to define and give examples of flying squadrons, strikes, stretchouts, lintheads, and other unfamiliar vocabulary. As students provide information from their various readings, write the main ideas on the board. The students will take notes on the discussion.
Activity 1 – People in the past: Understanding personal experiences related to the Uprising of ‘34

Prior to engaging students in an in-depth examination of the actual General Textile Shrike of 1934, this activity (as well as the three which follow) will enable students to understand some of the conditions surrounding the strike. We suggest this activity as a way to begin a study of the strike, but do not wish to suggest that the subject matter in this activity will directly prepare students to understand why the strike took place. The causes for the strike are broader and will be addressed later. Instead, with this activity we simply wish to introduce students to some of people of involved and affected by the 1934 strike.

This activity has three parts. Student will first work individually to develop an understanding of an actual historical character that was involved or affected by the 1934 strike. These people owned, lived, and/or work in mill villages across the American South. After working individually to develop an initial understanding of their person, students will work in small groups with students who have the same person. Lastly, students will re-assemble in new groups consisting of students who study different people. This jigsaw activity should provide students with multiple opportunities to learn about strike related experiences.

Assign the following historical characters to students. Each character will be represented by a specific historical figure and is presented as a representative sample of a broader category of people who might have lived in mill villages. We have assembled a collection of primary sources for this PDF lesson which can be used by students to learn about their persona. Additional primary sources are available on the Work n Progress website.

Characters
(1) the owner of a textile mill
(2) a white child in the mill village
(3) a African American female domestic worker in the mill village
(4) a white female textile worker
(5) a African American male who works on the loading dock of the mill
(6) a white male mill worker working a loam

In the first segment of this activity, students should explore his or her character using the historical primary sources available in the Lesson Resources section of this lesson. These primary documents are interviews conducted by the producers of “The Uprising of ‘34” documentary. Additional interviews are available on the Work ‘n Progress website. To support students as they work with these interviews we have developed an Interview Analysis Worksheet, available in the Lesson Resources section for this lesson.

Following the individual activity, the students with the same character will form 4 or 5 small groups (assuming a class of 24-30). The purpose of this group activity is for students to share their understanding of their person and develop a deeper understanding of the strike related experiences of their person. Each interview represents recollection of the strike. Students must work together to create a more robust characterization of how the strike must have affect people like the person
who was interviewed. The students should discuss the plight, motivations, and perspectives of their assigned character. Additionally, the students should share the answers to Interview Analysis Worksheet findings with others in their group.

Following this activity, student should move into new groups consisting of one person with each of the six different character roles. In this group setting, students should take 2 minutes to share a character sketch of their person. Directions for preparing this character sketch are in the Interview Analysis Worksheet.
Activity 2 – Settling the strike

This part the lesson is focused directly on the General Textile Mill Strike. One way to open this part of the lesson might involve getting students to think about the causes for the strike. The following quote from the Belgian writer Raoul Vaneigem might prompt students to think cortically about textile mill conditions.

“The same people who are murdered slowly in the mechanized slaughterhouses of work are also arguing, singing, drinking, dancing, making love, holding the streets, picking up weapons, and inventing new poetry.”

From Raoul Vaneigem’s the Revolution of Everyday Life

Prompt students’ thinking about conditions leading to the strike by asking them to consider the meaning of “mechanized slaughterhouses of work” and “inventing new poetry.” During the discussion, point out that the first part of the quotation is in the passive voice (people are murdered -- it is done to them) but the second part is active-- the people are doing these activities. Ask students if they think this is significant and why?

In preparation for this activity, assign or reassign the six characters described in Activity 1.

• the owner of a textile mill
• a white child in the mill village
• a African American female domestic worker in the mill village
• a white female textile worker
• a African American male who works on the loading dock of the mill
• a white male mill worker working a loam

Create 6 – 9 person groups with at least one of each of the characters in each group. There may be more than one type of mill worker in each group in the event that the class size is not divisible by six; the mill workers roles (4 through 6) should be duplicated to equal the remainder.

Assign one mill owner to each group so students can understand the effects of varying power relationships in a labor dispute. The role of the mill owner might be best suited for a gregarious and obstinate student; for the negotiations to be successful, the role of the mill owner must go a student that will be able to exert the power inherent in the manager/employee relationship without giving into social pressure.

The activity should center on a simulated bargaining meeting. In order for the simulated meeting to work, students will need to understand the different and, for the most part, mutually exclusive priorities of the individual roles. Each person in the group will bargain for the best outcome for their represented group. To bolster the argument, students should use notes from the lecture (or film) and the various primary sources presented in the first group. The students should discuss the following categories:

• Working Conditions including hours and wage
• Life for in the Textile Mill Village
• Role of the bosses (Management)
• Role of Religion and Churches.
Activity 3 – Letters to FDR

Another approach to this subject matter might involve students using their interview analysis for the purpose of writing a letter to the President Franklin D. Roosevelt or Mrs. Roosevelt. This type of extension will enable students to generalize and infer from the knowledge they developed about their character. This type of thinking is a critical part of the historian task. All historical records are incomplete and historians must work to fill in the gaps. By completing this activity students will have to, in a sense, fill in a gap, by suggesting how their character might have voiced their opinion in a letter to the President or First Lady.

When students write their letters to President or First Lady, they need to explain the plight of workers in southern textile mills or explain the reasons why a mill owner would want the workers left alone. An interesting twist on this activity would be to require student to write the letter from the perspective of a character other than the one they studied. This would allow for an opportunity to assess the extent to which students learned about another character in the third part of the group activity. Two sample letters are available in the Lesson Resources section.

A useful resource for preparing this activity and might be the New Deal Network’s Dear Mrs. Roosevelt available online at http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor. As an extension for this activity, the students can analyze child labor in the world today.

Activity 4 – Collage on the strike

Another option is for students to create posters promoting the fair treatment of textile workers, using examples taken from the study of photos from the strike. In the Lesson Resource section of this lesson we have assembled 10 photos from the strike. Each of these photos represents something emblematic from the strike. Ask students to create a collage representation of the images. This creative project should include some text, but ideally he image will convey much of the meaning.

Activity 5 – Photo analysis of experiences during strike

Another activity using the photos in this lesson could involve students analyzing a single photo. Give each student a copy of one of the photographs contained in the Lesson Resources section and ask students to put themselves in the picture. They can be a textile mill worker, a child, a member of mill management, or an outside visitor. Ask each student to write a one page description of their experience in the photograph. Encourage vivid and descriptive language and ask students to use words that evoke the senses.
Activity 6 - Similes about the strike

For this activity, the students can either work alone or partner with another student to create a simile or metaphor relating to the working conditions in textile mills or living conditions in the mill village around 1934. For example the groups may write, “working with a loom during the speed-up system in a textile mill is like trying to juggle a hundred balls” or “living in a mill village house is like living in a clown car.” The students might then illustrate their simile or metaphor on poster board. The teacher should debrief the group work by having each group show and explain their simile to the class.

Activity 7 – Journal writing

In this activity, the student could write a first-person, one page description of the life of a person affected by the strike. This might be the person they were assign in activity 1 or some other character or actual person who lived through the strike. Students should include their person’s beliefs about the benefits or problems related to the textile industry; a description of their family, their house, and their neighborhood; a description of the work they do; and their hopes and/or fears for the future. This may be in the form of a narrative, diary entries, a journal, or letters. Students should use vivid language to appeal to the senses in order to create an authentic feeling for the time and place.

Activity 8 - Newspapers analysis

Another option is for each group a collection of newspaper headlines from August and September of 1934 that document the General Textile Strike. Remove any reference to the date on the newspapers and label each document with a letter for quick reference. Ask students to place the newspapers in the correct chronological order based on the information presented in each headline. In order for the students to successfully complete this assignment, they will have to use critical thinking skills. The students will have to analyze each article and headline to accurately place the events in the correct order.

To debrief the group work, ask students to evaluate the outcome of the strike. What happened? Why did the strike fail? What were the negative results? Were there any positive outcomes? Ask students to relate what they have learned about the General Textile Strike of 1934 to labor conflicts of today. See the Lesson Resources for printable versions of the newspaper headlines.

Background reading excerpts on the 1934 General Textile Mill Strike

The General Textile Strike of 1934 directed by the United Textile Workers of America (UTWA) was the largest strike in American history. At the height of the strike, in mid-September, nearly 500,000 workers in 21 states from Maine to Alabama had walked off the job.

The strike began, amid high hopes, on Labor Day, September 3, 1934. Textile workers felt President Roosevelt and the law was on their side. But when the strike finally ended on September 22, the workers had been completely defeated. Not one of the objectives, for which the union struck, had been achieved. That the national strike director, UTW vice-president Francis Gorman, chose to call this debacle a "magnificent victory" did nothing to help the already seriously diminished credibility of the union. The UTW was never again a significant factor in organizing southern textile workers...

Georgia was among the national leaders in the manufacturing of cotton textiles; it was the largest industry in the state, employing over 60,000 people, and Eugene Talmadge, Georgia's flamboyant governor, was to play a dramatic and pivotal role in the strike. The primary election to determine if Talmadge would win a second two-year term as governor fell on September, 12th right in the middle of the General Strike. Throughout the campaign, and especially during the time the strike was actually going on, Talmadge made a demagogic [extremely emotional] appeal to the state's cotton mill workers. In a well-publicized promise to the unions, he said, "I will never use the troops to break up a strike."

Talmadge was hardly an avid supporter of unions; indeed, he tended to view the labor movement as a communist-dominated conspiracy and had little real sympathy for organized labor. But Talmadge had made many powerful enemies during his stormy first term. He vigorously opposed certain aspects of Roosevelt's recovery program and had managed to get himself at odds with the popular President. Organized labor had already split with Talmadge over his opposition to direct relief and the National Recovery Administration (NRA) wage scales, and the Governor was afraid of further alienating this large group of voters on the eve of the election.

As soon as his re-election was assured, however, Talmadge committed an act of almost unbelievable treachery. On the very night of the primary election, responding to a bribe from the mill owners, the Governor broke his promise and called out Georgia's entire 4,000 man National Guard. The troops were ordered to "arrest the picketers and get the mills back in operation." An incredible display of brutality followed as thousands of Georgia's already oppressed mill workers were beaten, bayoneted, and rounded up into detention camps where they were held without charge under military law. With action that revealed careful planning, union strike leaders were arrested simultaneously all across the state and held incommunicado [not allowed to communicate with anyone]. Theodore Forbes, executive secretary of the Cotton Manufacturing Association of Georgia, commented, "Talmadge is the best Governor this state ever had; he broke the strike for us." ....The strike had been an unmitigated disaster for Georgia's textile workers. Few strikers and no union men were rehired as called for in the agreement terminating the strike. Four men were dead and the state labor organization was in shambles. The strike ended with militiamen brutally beating a fifth worker to death in front of his family when he moved too slowly when ordered from the Callaway Mill property.
The last upsurge of union activity in the Piedmont [before World War II] came in 1934 as part of the General Strike, north and south, arising out of the U.T.W.'s [United Textile Workers'] dissatisfaction with the operation of the [New Deal] code for the cotton textiles. In the Piedmont, the union organized "Flying Squadrons"—motorcades of organizers and picketers that set out from organized centers and either persuaded or forced the workers of unorganized mills to quit work. In many cases, little persuasion and no pressure was necessary to provoke a walkout; there was "strike fever" in the air. The whole pattern of forces...had already operated to create a situation of explosive tension that was touched off by the arrival of the Flying Squadron. There was in addition the fact that for almost two years union organizers had been urging southern workers that "President Roosevelt wants you to join the union," and those who had joined, and had been "payin' their dues to the gov'ment" were beginning to want some of action for their money. A present union official who was a leader of some of the Squadrons at the time told the writer, "There was nothing to it. We'd roll up to mill after mill at shift-changing time. All we'd have to do was say to the people going to work, 'Let's close it down boys?' and out they'd come."

If they did not come out, pickets were thrown around the mill. Picket-line struggles almost inevitably ensued when the workers who were not in sympathy with the strike attempted to go back and forth to work, and for this reason many mills were voluntarily closed to avoid the possibility of bloodshed even when their people had refused to strike. Ten thousand National Guardsmen were called out in the South, an informal variety of "martial law" was declared in Georgia, and vigilante committees were organized in the Carolinas. The strike had been called on Labor Day. On September 22 it was terminated by the Executive Board of the UTW, on the basis of an expressed hope by President Roosevelt that the strikers would return to work and that the employers would take them back without discrimination. The strike was already beginning to crumble in the South, however, and it is doubtful if any other practical course was open to the union.

Despite the inconclusive statement, the union.....announced as a "great victory" what was actually a strategic retreat. In this case,... the workers themselves were aware of the extent of the "victory"...[T]heir resentment rebounded to the detriment of the union and the officials who had led them...Greater frankness with the workers would have provided a better basis for future organizational efforts.”
Nesbitt Spinks, who had just caught on at the mill shortly before the strike, recalls:

The Exposition Cotton Mill, a union hadn't been messing with them very much up until then. But they got them in there and they got them on strike. Of course, they were striking all over the country.

The majority of them was out. I don't think they had a lot of people still in there, but they had enough, I guess, to carry on some of the work. They had told us all we had to stay out there on the picket line. We'd stay and talk to people as they came and went, and try to turn people back. You know, a lot of people would go in there and go to work, looking for a job. We'd do more of our picketing in the afternoon, when they was changing shifts. Then at certain times there would be big crowds gathered there. So, there was quite a big stir there.

I guess the freight train coming in there was the biggest stir that I remember. The railroad was trying to get in there to pull some stuff out, and leave some stuff. And they said the railroad was scabbing against them, you know. We all got up on the track there. There was a crowd of people out there, men and women and, the best I remembered, there might have been a couple of children out there. And the train pulled right up there pretty close, and stopped. But of course they couldn't run over us. The policies come out and ordered us off, and we still didn't go. And they brought tear gas out there and shot tear gas into us. And seemed like the train did go in after that. Of course, they made it rough on the people at the cotton mill, any way they could, that come out on strike."

Spinks also was arrested on the Exposition picket line:

There was a squabble at the gate. There was somebody who was trying to push their way in, and they was forcing their way in. Of course, they got a squabble started, and two or three got cut in the time of it. I got this scar and twenty-seven stitches across the back of my neck back there. The company fired me during that time, see.

Fulton Bag was the last mill in the Atlanta area to close down during the strike. Frank Hicks related,

I was working at Fulton Bag. Fulton Bag hadn't shut down. Exposition had done shut down. And there was a bunch, on I guess twenty-five or thirty from the Exposition come over to my house. Some of them come and said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm going to work, I've got to get my money.' It was payday that day. 'Well, what's the mill going to do' I said, 'Well, I'll tell you, I believe they're going to shut down.' ... They come around and told us, 'Now, if the lights flash twice, just top everything off, we'll go out and no trouble.' Well, they flashed once. In a few minutes they flashed again. They all went out at that time.

There were many... causalities of the strike, too. The management was very much opposed to unionizing the mill, recalls social worker Augusta Dunbar, whose district included the Fulton Bag community, "so everybody who joined the union..."
was fired. Not only were they fired, but they were evicted, given notice of eviction from the mill houses.”

A lot of them were fired, states country musician and Fulton Bag worker Marion Brown. “They culled them out of there, one by one,” says Clifford Lovins,

because it wouldn’t do for them to fire them on account of the union. The company could be handled for that. But they’d find something wrong with your work. Didn’t have a chance. The, when you went to another mill, ‘Well how come you had to leave the Exposition?’ ‘Oh no, I just got laid off.’ Well they’d notify them [that you’d been in the union]. And there was a lot of them fellers worked in cotton mills for years that couldn’t get another job.

Even some workers, like Frank Hicks, who were only suspected of union activity were discharged once the unsuccessful strike ended in late September.

I went to go back to work, but my boss man told me I was helping organize because all them people was at my house. Well, I couldn’t tell them peoples to go out. Some of them was my kinfolks and some wasn’t, but they come over there to see what was going to take place, to see if they shut down. So, they didn’t let me go back to work.

The labor shortage that followed the strike further sped up production, as Clifford Lovins relates: "We got [a third] machine to run, and only got pay for running the two. They cut out every third hand in that mill. And all over it, brother, not just in one department." And poor working conditions, low wages and a hostile anti-union climate persisted in the Southern mills.
Focus questions for readings


1. How long did the General Textile Strike of 1934 last? Why does the author call it “the largest strike in history”?

2. What role did Governor Eugene Talmadge play in the strike? Why does the author say he “committed an act of unbelievable treachery”?

3. What were the results of the strike for the union and for striking workers?


4. Describe the “Flying Squadrons.” How did they operate and what effect did they have?


5. Describe Nesbitt Spink’s experience in the strike of 1934.

6. What happened to striking workers during and after the strike?
Interview Analysis Worksheet

When analyzing your interview, consider the following questions.

- What type of document are you working with?
- Who produced this document?
- When was it produced?
- Why do you think this document was created?
- Summarize the contents of this document
- What type of person is characterized in the document?
- Make some educated guess or inferences about what this person’s life must have been like. Go beyond what the document tells you.

Character Sketch

Describe the type of person who is the subject of your document. In your descriptions focus on the person’s work life and consider characteristics which can be generalized or applied to other people, just as;

- the type of work they did,
- their age when they did the work,
- the amount of freedom they had in their social life
- their general likes and dislikes
- the family status and how they balanced family life and work life
Primary source document list: Activities related to social life in 1930s textile mill villages

Primary source documents in this resource section are available for each of the following personas. Each document is a portion of an interview done by the producers of the documentary film “Uprising of '34.” The interviews were conducted in the early 1990s almost sixty years after the strike. We have included one image from the transcript of the interview to provide students with an idea of how and why this document was created. The document images include marginal notes relating to the film production. Following this opening image is a lengthier transcribed segment of the interview.

Owner of a textile mill
White child in the mill village
African American female domestic worker in the mill village
White female textile worker
African American male who works on the loading dock of the mill
White male mill worker working a loam

Owners and Managers of Mills
• Jake Gray (available in this lesson)
• Joseph Lineberger (available on the website)
• Robert Ragan (available on the website)
• Walter Montgomery (available on the website)

Children
• Sue Hill (available in this lesson)
• Charlie Wetzell (available on the website)
• Woody Wood (available on the website)
• Dr. Elliot White (available on the website)

African American Female Domestic Workers
• Blanche Willis (available in this lesson)
• Grace Gardin Wilson (available on the website)

White Female Textile Workers
• Lucille Thornburgh (available in this lesson)
• Laura Hull Bread (available on the website)
• Opal McMichael (available on the website)
• Rosa Mae Murphy King (available on the website)

African American Male Textile Workers
• Bruce Grahm (available in this lesson)
• E.O. Friday (available on the website)
• R.J Terrell (available on the website)

White Male Textile Workers
• Bill Woodham (available in this lesson)
• Charles Helton (available on the website)
• Woodrow Wright (available on the website)
• R.A. Atkins (available on the website)
Interview with Jake Grey – Owner of Grey Specialty Yarns

GASTONIA, NORTH CAROLINA
BEGIN INTO TAPE 08
DIRECTIONAL

INT: All right, sir, tell us about the 1934 Strike.

JAKE GRAY (GRAY): Well, as I say, the 1934 Strike was more publicity than it was credibility. It was caused by a bunch of jackasses runnin' around didn't have anything to do except talk to themselves and maybe somebody from TWA -- ah, TWA, come in -- Textile Workers of the World -- come in and said, "You boys ought to protest (unintelligible) by gittin' on your motorcycles and ridin' and pullin' some switches in the mill." So they did that, got a lot of publicity but no action at all. Not a single person walked out.

INT: Tell us about your mill. Just name your mill and tell what happened at your mill.

GRAY: My mill was called Gray Specialty Yarns at that time. They came in to me -- I only had a very small operation, which three twisters makin' novelty yarns. And I said, "What in the hell you boys doin' here?" I knew most of 'em. They said, "We're stoppin' the stretchout." Says, "What the hell you doin'?" I got three twisters and
Interviewee: Jake Gray, Gray Mill, Gastonia, NC

INT: All right, sir, tell us about the 1934 Strike.
Jake Gray (Gray): Well, as I say, the 1934 Strike was more publicity than it was credibility. It was caused by a bunch of jackasses runnin’ around didn’t have anything to do except talk to themselves and maybe somebody from TWA—ah, TWW, came in—Textile Workers of the World—come in and said, “You boys ought to protest this thing hard by gittin’ on your motorcycles and ridin’ and pullin’ some switches in the mill.” So they did that, got a lot of publicity but no action at all. Not a single person wlked out.

INT: Tell us about your mill. Just name your mill and tell what happened at your mill.
Gray: My mill was called Gray Specialty Yarns at that time. They came in to me—I only had a very small operation, which three twisters makin’ novelty yarns. And I said, “What in the hell you boys doin’ here?” I knew most of ‘em. They said, “We’re stoppin’ the stretchout.” Says, “What the hell you doin’? I got three twisters and I got three people runnin’ ‘em.” “Well, don’t put any more people.” You’re lucky to have a job. People don’t realize how much it costs to provide a job, how much money that’s—in one job today it costs you $100,000 per job to build a viable mill. If you’re goin’ to work 30,000 people, it costs you $3 million. Nobody knows. They don’t appreciate the fact that it cost a hell of a lot of money to provide jobs.

INT: Describe the stretchout. You told us a little while ago.
Gray: Well, I think it was mostly the dolfers sittin’ around all day and they got used to that and maybe some superintendent decided to put ‘em to sweppin’ or maybe they give a spinner an extra set of sides. It wasn’t anything riotry, nothin’ wrong really. And, as I say, it had no credibility at all. It had nobody leadin’ it and nobody follerin’ it.

INT: What happened when the flying squadron came to your factory?
Gray: I told ‘em to git the hell otta there. And they did.

INT: How did you protect your factory?
Gray: Had a gun.
Gray: With a gun.

INT: Could you describe that?
Gray: Just a police special, .32 special, police special, Smith & Wesson.

INT: Where were you at that time?
Gray: Sat right in the door when they tried to come in. I wouldn’t let ‘em in. I said, “You’re going to scare all”—I had ladies runnin’ the twisters. I said, “You’re goin’ to scare these girls to death. Git the hell outta here.” They went.

INT: Where did they come from?
Gray: Oh, I don’t know, maybe Firestone, some of the mills around, more than likely one of the fine yarn mills—Parkdale or Gray mills or Arden, Archway (?), wherever.
INT: Did you recognize any of them?
Gray: Oh, yeah, I knew ‘em all.
INT: You knew all the fellahs who came to your mil?
Gray: Yeah.
Gray: Yes, I recognized and could call them by name, but I don't recall their name at this time.

INT: Whatever happened to those fellows?
Gray: They worked they life out. They went right back to work just like everybody else. Most of 'em, nobody left their jobs. Only people involved in it were the dolfers runnin' around. They had a motorcycle and they called themselves "the flying squadron." Thy got a lot of publicity and accomplished nothin', signing a few signifyin' nothing is what it amounted to.

INT: Now you were a member of an association of employers, I believe, who took some joint action.
Gray: No, I was not a member of that. We were not big enough to be in that. We were very small and we were not a cotton mill. We were makin' rayon, (unintell.) and double E yarns. We were not big enough to anybody really. We were tryin' to make a livin'. That's all we were tryin' to do. We'd lost everthing we had by that time and we was tryin' to make a livin', and we were doin' it the only way we knew, is by makin' yarns. That's the only thing I know about anyhow.

INT: Well now, could you go back a little bit now and describe what happened? As I listened to your tape, you had a big mill and then you lost it.
Gray: Oh, we had 8 big mills, my father did, called Gray Sea Park. An we put 'em into Textiles, Incorporated, and Textiles, Incorporated went into receivership. We were worth maybe 40 or 50 million bucks when we went to bed at night in '33, and the next afternoon about 4 o'clock we lacked $40,000 bein' worth a dime. That's a pretty—pretty big blow, but that what—and it ain't so bad just to be broke, but to be in debt for $40,000 is pretty bad and here ain't no way to make it back.

INT: Now could you talk about your industry as against the industry in New England?
Gray: Well, what happened—the reason—the people—after my grandfather bought the combed yarn mills down here, the people in the South began to really take an interest in the machinery and modernization of the plants and had real efficient plants. That's why New England closed and it was just so much cheaper to manufacture here than it was in New England. New England was involved in a lot of labor unions and so forth and so on. And we didn't have any in Gastonia. We had one mill in Gastonia that was unionized, and only one mill, in my lifetime, which is 77 years now.

INT: Could you—did you—you didn't have a mill village, did you?
Gray: My father had 8 villages and he tried to do somethin' to help the people, but they really didn't want help. He put—at Gray Mills, he put—Gray Manufacturin’ company he put, ah, bathrooms in all the village houses and they had the nurse go by and check 'em the next two or three weeks, and went around an find in all the bathtubs they had coal! They didn't take no baths. They wanted 'em to take they bath. They cold, so the mill gave 'em the coal, so they put the coal in the bathtub. It's nice coal bin. So he spent a lot of money for nothin'.

INT: What did you do in the mills?
Gray: What did I do? Ever damned thing you can do, from the picker room through the spinnin’ and windin’. I’ve run everthing. I came out of Duke University, and my father started Threads, Incorporated. He was an expert threadman. So he gve me a job runnin’ the glazin’ room at threads, Incorporated. Now a glazin’ room is so hot—it never got under 120 in there. Here I am, a college man, I’m makin’ $6 a week and I’m workin’ 65 hours a week. I was workin’ 12 hours a day, five days a week, and 5 hours on a Saturday. And I’m paid $6 a week. Then the NRA come in and they wouldn’t let us work by 40 hours and made ‘em pay us $12 a week—we had more time and money than we knew what the hell to do with! Of course, a bottle of liquor—(unintell.) didn’t cost but a dollar-and-a-half. You didn’t need no money. You got illegal and you’d buy all the groceries you could eat for three months for a $5 dollar bill.

INT: What did you think of Franklin Roosevelt?
Gray: Well, in some ways I thought he was great and—
Gray: Some ways Mr. Roosevelt was a great man and some ways you have to admit that he caused more socialism in this country than any man has ever live. No question about that, but, by the same token, if the things that he proposed had been followed correctly, the older people in this country wouldn’t have anything to worry about. If al the money of Social Security had been put in a separate fund and kept thataway, we would be drawin’ $10,000 a moth instead of a thousand dollars a month. There’s no question about that.

INT: Talk about the women in the mill.
Gray: What do you want to talk about the women in the mills? (laughter) They were fine. That’s the greatest stock in the world, but they were looked down upon actually, and they were kind of exploited, but this—that was fine quality stock and didn’t really get it done (unintell.), but people tried to exploit (?) the girls in the mills.

INT: How was that?
Gray: There were immediately figurin. They were a soft touch, which wasn’t necessarily true by any stretch of the imagination. Listen, let’s be perfectly frank. I was guilty of it myself.

INT: Now one of the things that I’m wondering about is with so many women in the mills, there weren’t any women overseers or supervisors or—
Gray: No. Oh, no.

INT: Would you talk about that?
Gray: Well, they just weren’t qualified, we didn’t think. Probably they were better qualified—
Gray: I say the women weren’t qualified today, but after a period of time they became—we found out they were really—in the last mill I built, which was New Dawn, was the first open-ended spinnin’ mill in the world, I had lady fixers and lady overseers because they were qualified. We found out they were qualified and did a good job.

INT: What made for the change?
Gray: I don’t have any idea. They certainly didn’t go to school to learn it. They just picked up the kind of tricks by bein’ associated with it.
INT: What?
Gray: Runnin’ the frame made ‘em associate themselves and they would fix their own—own problems.

INT: But it was your attitude that was changed, too, and I want to know how that happened.
Gray: I never changed my attitude. I always thought they were capable, but I never gave ‘em a chance till 1970.

INT: Why do you think that was true?
Gray: I don’t have any idea bout it.

INT: Let’s talk about the colored in the mills the same way.
Gray: Well, they were—
Gray: Now I have—I only found one good—I had one good qualified overseer a colored man, only one. And I hate to say it, I am becoming a little bigoted. At this state of the game I haven’t seen but one that’s really qualified to be an overseer of people. I had one that was good and the people liked him, but only one. And I tried several.

INT: What did—what did they do in the ‘20s and 30’s?
Gray: They were strictly—you were at the colored phase.

INT: Yes. Do you want to tell us about that?
Gray: Well, actually we didn’t have many people in the mills—black people in the mills. We had some in the warehouse section, some of ‘em runnin’ pickers, but actually no many. So they really didn’t have a chance to learn. Not that they were not capable of learnin’, but they didn’t have a chance to learn.

INT: Why do you think that happened?
Gray: Just because we were the South and didn’t believe in givin’ colored people the same chance that the white people had. That’s basically true.

INT: Let me ask you something. I don’t want to put words in your mouth, so be careful. But some people have said that if you put colored in the mills, the white mill workers wouldn’t tolerate it.
Gray: Could have been true. We just didn’t give it a chance to find out whether it was true or not. Could have been true, though. The mill workers’ the biggest bunch of rednecks you’ll ever find.

INT: Was there a Klan in the mills?
Gray: No, not really. Never saw—I never saw any evidence of a Klan—are you talkin’ about a Klu Klux Klan? No, I never saw any members of that. They didn’t go that far. They just had their own notions about the colored people, and they probably wouldn’t have tolerated it. I don’t know how far we could have gotten with it. We always said that we all been usin’—we had a well deep of labor market that we never tapped—the colored people. They were willin’ to work. We didn’t give them a chance. We don’t know how they would have done.

INT: Now—
Gray: You see, these—these white employees generally learned how to run their jobs by goin’ in as a child, and workin’ with their mother or their father or whatever. That’s the way they learned how to run they jobs. They weren’t paid, but they were comin in there, and not a whinin’, with their sister or mother or whatever, or learnin’ how to spin. This was the trainin’ program that you had and you allowed them to bring—this is back in the ‘20s. And they brought their people in, bought—see most of these people came from the mountains. They didn’t have anything in the mountains up in Appalachia. So they came down here and you give ‘em a job, the whole family, a job. The papa would be card hand and mama would be a spinner and daughters’d be windin’ hand and the boys would be dolfers. And the girls be windin’ hands. And they would learn the trade by—

Gray: They came down here and we give ‘em a house to live in we give ‘em jobs and we give them and opportunity to learn jobs so that actually they had a pretty good deal. You get four-five people here in one house workin’ and bringin’ in money—they brought in, say $10 a week, you had $50 a week. And in those days that was a whole lot of money. So they had really a pretty good job. And they all had jobs, which was somethin’ that in the ‘30s nobody had. If you—if—these mills were all built in the ‘20s and if they had to built ‘em in the ‘30s, they’d never gotten built. They didn’t have any money. They wasn’t makin’ any money.

Gray: We showed you on that plaque. The mill owners were considered the parental people. They were father images to the—all their help, as you saw by that plaque there that I had that said, “Happy Birthday to Papa Gray”? Well, we were considered—all the employees—a woman’d get pregnant, come and ask you—the first person she come to is the man that owned the mill she was workin’ for to giver her the money for her abortion. And we did. We took care of it.

Gray: Well, we were considered father figures and all their problems they cam to us with, and we generally helped them as much a we could, regardless of what the problem was. And they had a lot of problems, but we always helped them as much as we possibly could. All depended on how successful you were as to how much help you could give ‘em.

INT: What kind of help did you give them?
Gray: Money, which is the only help that anybody needs that I know of. And usually if you got enough money, you can get out of anything. That’s what my son, the lawyer says. “If you give me enough money, I can get you out of anything, any damned thing you want to get out of! Murder, whatever!”

INT: Okay. One of the things that I’ve been quite amazed at is particularly among the older women they talk about how much fun they had in the mills.
Gray: They did have fun.

INT: What about religion in the mills?
Gray: Some of the superintendents were very, very, very tough on it. And if you didn’t go to church, they’d fire you. But we never had that. We talked religion, but I was never that hard on anybody this missed goin’ to church. (unintell.), the fellah that ran that mill ‘round here, he was real hard and we had a superintendent, H.D. Whitener up at the Myrtle Mill. He was real bad on it. And there, we did have a
strike one time and it turned out bad for ‘em too. They struck and so Daddy says to H.D. Whitener, says “Don’t you even go to the mill. If they want to march around, let ‘em march. Don’t go in. Lock the doors and get away. Don’t even be available.” So he stayed away and finally we weren’t doin’ any negotiatin’, so they come up and business was kinda bad. And so they were strikin’ about some superintendent—overseer they had they didn’t like. So they came to Daddy and said they wanted to negotiate. And Daddy said, “Uh-uh. Frankly, I don’t care whether the damned mill runs or not, we open it up or not.” He said, “Business is bad. Now I’m on strike!” Well, they come back and said, “Well, we’ll do anything you want to do now.” He said, “No. I ain’t ready to go yet” and he just sit around and he went to strike. So he turned the tables on ‘em. So they went back to work on his terms. All those things were—they happened.
Interview with Sue Hill – Child working in a South Carolina textile mill

This interview was conducted in

SUE HILL:
Coming to visit and you know, seeing if we needed anything (got..) of course he was having problems with his own family..
Uh, he tried to organize a strike in Honea Path and they fired him.
He moved to Williamston and they heard about him trying to organize a strike, they fired him in Williamston.

QUESTION:
Can we stop (DIR) Start again: Uncle Jess tried to start a union - like that.

SUE HILL:
Okay want me to say that he was my mother’s brother.

QUESTION:
Yeah you could say that.. to momma..

SUE HILL:
Okay. (DIR) Well Uncle Jess was my mother’s brother. And I learned from her that he tried to start a union at the Chacoata mill and Honea Path. And some of the officials heard of this of the talk, you know, going on.
Sue Hill, Honea Path, SC, box 19

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Sue Hill (SH): Well Uncle Jess was my mother's brother. And I learned from her that he tried to start a union at the Chacoata mill and Honea Path. And some of the officials heard of this or the talk, you know, going on. And he was fired. He moved to Williamston and did the same thing, he tried to start some unions around some other mills. He left and went to Greenville, and was blackballed from the plants in Greenville. And because of the union...And he was out of work quite a while, and he had a large family that he had to support. He never did get the union accomplished. I think until the day he died he tried to work for the union and get them, you know, but he never did get anything accomplished. He was a likeable man, everybody loved him. He was wanting something better for the people that he worked with. They were being treated so badly. And he was just trying more or less to get something for the people that he worked with to better themselves.

Question: Start at the top...talk about the Honea Path...took over ( ) and how they...what he was trying to do in Honea Path.
SH: Well the superintendent of the...of Chicola Mill was also mayor of Honea Path. And he had the town really where he wanted it...sewed up. (Directions) Uncle Jess tried to organize the union to help the people... He was seeing how badly they were being treated and he just wanted to do something for them, they were being paid low wages, they were just being treated so badly. And he had talked among some of the other men to try to get something to help everybody. But the superintendent of Chicola Mill was also mayor of Honea Path...he had the policemen, the town, the churches, the mill stores, everything, tied up to where no one could do anything unless the union came in. And they fought that...they didn't want anyone coming in to change what they had going. And they found out that he was trying to form a union, and they fired him...Did not tell him why, and insisted it wasn't because he was trying to form a union. But trying to say it was because of other things. He left and went to Williamston...and tried to form one because they had the same conditions that Chacoata Mill had. He was fired there, moved to Greenville and tried to form some unions there in the mill...Brandon. In Greenville. They blackballed him at all the mills...and he he did not get a union accomplished. But, when the union people were trying to go into the mills to...or they were really trying to keep them from going into the mills, reporting to work at Chacoata Mill...

Question: We will stop for a second.
SH: After Uncle Jess left Chacoata—prior to the strike the people...the men got together and were trying to go with the union, trying to get something formed for the conditions that were going on...the superintendent, Dan Beecham heard about this, the morning that this was to happen he placed men up in the winders...in the Chacoata Mill, with guns, picket sticks, anything they had to fight with, the men that were trying to get the union started were trying to go in...And they started shooting out the mill winders. They killed several. My daddy was not on the mill ground, he was across the street when they shot him and the men that were on the mill ground they were just shooting them down. Dan Beecham told them to kill everybody that was on the mill ground if they could. And they also had some type of gun up in the mill that if they had got it started—they couldn't get it to to good, it jammed on them—they would have probably killed a lot more than what they did. But when they started shooting people just started running. They were running away from the mill, they shot them in the back most of them. And my daddy was across the street, they shot him five times. Twice in the back, three in the front.
They killed one man, shot him ten times. Turned him over and shot him again. So they were...they were just determined to kill as many of them as they could. Two women got shot. They were just, it was havoc, they were just running everywhere to try to get away from the bullets. And the policemen were involved...in fact, my dad’s death certificate reported that he was shot by a policeman. Which is untrue, he wasn’t, he was shot from the mill winder. And they gave momma the name of the man that shot him. And he said he had come to momma and made it right, but he had never spoke to my mom. But you know, we have no way of knowing who really killed daddy. It was just reports. Some said that he was killed because he was Uncle Jess Michael’s brother-in-law. That they found out. He was his brother-in-law and killed him, but you know, we really don’t know...But I do know that it caused mom to have a hard life. She had six children. One of the other men that got killed had six children, my husband’s uncle was killed, he had five children. And and it just really mad a a hard life for all of us.

We...momma was not working. At the time. They sent for her to come to work, in the shirt plant, manufacturing place uptown and she went to work with them making seven dollars a week. Then they had the trial at Chacoata...they sent for mom to come to the trial and it was just havoc...you know, they really didn’t get the truth of what went on, or why the men were killed. Why they were shot in the back, why they were trying to get away. They...the only thing they offered mom was a job. She got no no money...she was offered a job that she would have a job the rest of her life...and could not be fired. They wanted her to pay her back rent, that she had been living in the home since daddy got killed and which she did...They sent her a letter stating that they wanted her to catch her rent up. But it was, it was a hard life. But she kept us all togethere and she worked. The oldest boys, all of us worked in that mill at one time. Because we had no other choice. There was you know, no other place in Honea Path to work in a plant of that, you know, making that as much money as we could make.

But at one time all of us worked in that mill. Up until we left in ’58. In which I had a time leaving, no one wanted me to leave. But we we moved and the strike in Honea Pat separated so many people it just half the town practically...People against people...they some was for the union, some was against. They thought it would bring more hardships into Honea Path. The churches were separated, friends were separated even to this day, don’t speak. They felt like that had that not happened you know, the...or the conditions were get better. But uh, it is a small town. And people don’t forget...very easy. It is hard to forget because it ( ) from one generation to the next, you know. But even the churches...they would not allow these men’s funerals to be preached in those churches. That they killed because they had the churches tied up.

There were around ten thousand came to those funerals. And they had them in the open. I were only nine myself when daddy got killed. The three youngest did not go to the funerals...the oldest ones went. But I guess a lot of...the way we survived some mornings mom would hear a knock on the door and there would be a box of groceries put under the door...step. We never knew where they came from. And some said that it was the man that killed daddy.

But, it was it was rough. It was...to her to raise six children she had to be very hard on us. She had four boys, and in a, on a male Hill, you know, it is a lot different from most places...It is...I can’t say that we didn’t have happy times, but we had a lot of enjoyment...She saw that we were taken care of. But it, had to be
hard on her. She worked third shift. And she went to work at that time at ten...And she was alone, she never remarried. She never did date, again. She led a lonely life. As I am sure the rest of the families did. I know that we were grateful to her because Miss Patterson put her children in an orphanage. And mom toughed it out. But she you know, she had to lead a lonely life.

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SH: But it was never the same town anymore. You were kind of afraid to talk because you didn’t know who was for the union and who was against the union. So we pretty well, you know, stayed to ourself and never discussed it among other people. I know my brothers grew up and vowed to kill this man that he said killed daddy. And my brothers had to grow up, they were oh, I guess you know when you grow up like that you fight for everything. And this man was terrified of my two oldest brothers. He would not speak to them. If they saw, if he saw my brothers coming he would cross the street. I had one brother was really really ill tempered, I mean he had really a bad temper, and he was terrified of him...

But I remember mom talking to them and saying no this is not the way you know, to do this. But...

Question: So when people talked about this...did they remember it, what part of this story did people talk about...And mention the strike.

SH: Well the the strike separated so many best friends, neighbors, the little communities that they lived in. Even people that went to church together, quit going to church together. They wouldn’t speak. Some of them pulled out and started new churches. And the ones that shopped together had a...kind of a section they called New Town and Old Town. Most of the strikers lived on the New Town section...which were newer homes, some of them lived in Old Town, very few. In the old...in the old homes. But they were just not friends anymore. It just did something to that town that has never been replaced. The new generation that is growing up don’t know a lot about the strike...or the union, you know, that was trying to form. And since we moved...we moved in 1958, we don’t go back anymore to visit. And I really don’t know what is going on now. Or where, you know, the newer generation has forgotten about all this. At the time I moved they hadn’t forgot it...because these parents kept you now, talking to their children about it. But now with the newer generation, you know, it might have changed, might not be the same place.

Question: What did the parents say to their children...what story did they tell?

SH: There were a lot of children that was not allowed to play with other children, because they separated people so bad, they just wasn’t allowed to play together—the ones that were for the union and the ones that were against. But we stayed in little groups, you know, we had good times, so on Mill Hill we had, play games—not like children do now, but we played different type of games. And we were happy...It was a hard life but we had good times too.

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Question: (DIR) You said you talked to your mom a lot about the strike...but she was afraid to talk to outsiders. That is a big question: tell us about that, did you ever talked, was it a strike against you, a taboo...what part was it okay to tell...

SH: Well when we were coming you know, up in school when we were attending school, I don’t ever ever remember one time. When I were attending school as a little girl and then growing up, I never remember the strike being brought up in school. It was like...it was not to be mentioned what happened. 1, I never
remember that being brought up. I know mom talked to me about it a lot...And she had asked me had this ever been discussed in school. And no, we had not. It was like, as if the teacher were told not to bring this up. I think they were just trying to keep it as quiet and maybe get it settled, you know...among people. I think they were just trying to keep it as quiet as they could. They had had so much trouble...a lot of the truth was not told at the trial. And that was the way, no one was...would let mom or any of the wives testify as to what they knew. It was just as if it was an open and close case. They did not come to mom and talk about it. Or about what was to be said, or what went on. They just made her this offer of giving her a job and that was it. It was not discussed how are you going to raise your family or do you need help. There was no money involved. Just an offer of a job.

And as far as I know all the families stayed in Honea Path. And all the families, most of them worked at Chacoata Mill. It was just it was to be dropped and no more discussion about it. But, the only thing that she received was that she would never be fired. Mom worked in that mill until she was fifty-seven. And she had a heart attack.

Pg 22-27
SH: The Chacoata Mill offered mom a settlement if you call it a settlement, of a job for life. That she would never be fired, and it was kind of like this is it...you take it or leave it. Well she had no other choice. She had six children...she had no other choice but to take it. She worked in that mill until she was fifty-seven. And had a slight attack, anyway she had to retire from the mill. But mom was a hard worker...She just wanted her children to stay together. And she did whatever she had to do it.

She worked on the third shift and slept in the daytime. My oldest sister took care of us. But at one time in their lifetime or other, they, we have all worked in the mill because we thought there were nothing else. We were like some of the other people in Honea Path, we was afraid to leave...afraid to try it. But it was it was a choice she had to take.

Question: The husband is killed, the letter says you have to leave the house...
SH: Mill...The Chacoata Mill just see mom had no education. She did not know where to turn to, who to talk to, about this. And when they came to her and said, they are going to be a trial, we are going to make you an offer. But they didn’t say what they were going to do. Uh, she didn’t know who to talk with. She didn’t know anyone with an education enough to talk to her about it. She...they wanted to know if she would be at the trial, she asked if she would testify, they said no...you will say nothing. And this is the choice she had. She knew that if she didn’t get a job or better than what she was making that she couldn’t keep her family together.

So she went, had to go along with whatever they said. That was the only choice she had. But think, you know, when dad had been in service, dad had been in World War One. And when at some time in that point in growing up, they started giving the wider’s pensions. She got...she was receiving an ( ) check from dad, it probably...when I were eight...that helped out some. The conditions at Chacota Mill did improve...somewhat after the strike. They were paying better wages, they were...the the policemen you know, was not as hard on the people as they were...
The mill stores were, seemed to you know, be more lenient when people owed them money. And conditions did improve somewhat. But it was still a hard life. People just seemed to be working to keep their families together. And to get over what they had just gone through.

Question: And you mentioned before, as you were growing up...the striker’s children couldn’t play with the non-striker’s children...does that mean somewhere there was still a feeling amongst people that they...the idea of a union?
SH: Most people...the the as I mentioned the New Town and the Old Town, there were kind of a little line that they drew...the...especially the boys from Old town were not to go over in new Town, vice versa...it was just kind of a little war they had going on...that you know, you would get beat up if you come to my side of town.

But they were some rough boys on Mill Hill, so it was...you know, and I don’t know whether it was just kind of a a teenage thing or where it was coming from the strike...the feelings were coming from the strike.

But I...I really don’t know. But in growing up we, my brothers and I we just kind of stayed on our side of town. And kind of had our own group. But you know still we didn’t discuss the strike or how we were growing up...we thought in growing up that we were you know, we wasn’t as poor as we were...but they were a many a time that we didn’t have enough food. Uh, see the mill also took care of the heating...they sold you wood...they sold you coal. And when you got it it was took out of your money that you made in the mill. They had the water supply, they had everything but in growing up I have to say that there were good times too.

They kept the houses up, they did all the repair work. If it is any consolation to you know, at all, they, Christmas they gave out fruit, and brought fruit baskets around. And we could hardly wait, you know. But they, I don’t know as children you know, when you are growing up you think that you are all right...you don’t know that you don’t have what other children have.

And, my mom had, did not have an education, we had to teacher that came around and taught the women on Mill Hill...specially in the Old Town, had to learn to read and write. And she taught my mom how to read and write. So she went to work when she was seven years old...in the mill. Seven years old. She could not reach the spinning frames, they made little boxes for her to stand on. That was before child labor. Some were eight, some were nine...Jake’s mother went to work when she was eight years old in the mill. And when you misbehaved or didn’t do your work they came to your parent to straighten you out. Not to you. But, that is all you know, they had ever known.

Pg 29-34
SH: Well anything—any talk between the men or to help improve the conditions would immediately get back to the superintendent of the mill. And he would stop it one way or the other. I know mom telling me you know, things about things were going to get better because the mean are talking among themselves about getting better conditions. Well it would immediately get back to the superintendent of the mill, and you were fired so, they were scared to talk, they were scared to do anything.
This is the only way they had to make a living. To keep their families together. And when Uncle Jess tried to bring it up to several men they said no, you know, we can't jeopardize our families...we have no way of making a living. And you know we will we will get fired if we bring, bring this up. He talked to the few that did go along with them, uh, was in this strike. Mr. Rarber, Mr. Davis, Mr. Night, several of them he...he had talked into trying you know, to form this union.

And when they fired Uncle Jess and he had to leave there, they kept talking about bringing this union in, and was trying to get something started. But it got back to the superintendent of the mill. And the morning that it was arranged for him to—the strike to start, he—it was started at a certain hour. And it was talked among all them, some of the people and mom know what was going on...dad knew what was going on.

And she begged daddy not to go up there...She said someone is going to get killed on those grounds if they try to go in that mill. But see they didn't know these people were already in the mill...and had the guns. No one knew that on the grounds. Until they started shooting.

They were not going to let them come in that mill. And take over. They were no way this man was giving that power up. And he would kill these people before he would let that happen...But it was just hush hush talk, you know, among people be...thy were afraid. They, they didn't know where to go on with it...but it was so bad till some of these men said it has got to come to an end...we got to get better the conditions than what we have. But the morning that it happened I know I was sick and mom asked dad not to go...it was only a short distance from our home.

He said he would be back, he was just going to be gone a few minutes...and she said he had left about forty-five minutes when she heard the shooting start. And she knew what was going on.

And, someone come and told her that he had been killed. But there are a couple that is still living in Honea Path that was on the grounds that it happened...Mr. and (Mrs.) Atkins...

She said when the shooting started, they saw everything happened. When the shooting started everybody just started running...she saw Mr. Rarber get killed. And she saw several of them shot...they were trying to get away...she said her and her husband was trying to run and get away. And they...so the man rolled Mr. Rarber over and and shot him again...

They I think they run to the house in front and tried to pull some things out...momma said that the lady had in the winder...some clothes or some bedclothes hanging out...and tried to help...she said they tried to do what they could. But the shooting was still goin on. She saw daddy laying on the sidewalk...and she she said it was just it was terrible. She couldn't sleep for days and nights, after that. She...that she was the these are the same people that went to our church...

That I remember growing up...very humble, best people you would want to meet...just good people but someone came back and she went up on the mill.
grounds with her a friend of hers, and she said it was just something that she would never forget.

But uh, you know, in growing up I have I have growed up with this, I have...uh, I have talked to some of the other kids in growing up, like I said it was not mentioned that much... It was just like everybody was trying to keep everything quiet.

Maybe it was just the...you know, just trying to get away from the sadness or the...what they had gone through. I haven't talked with a lot people anymore. I don't know how it is there anymore. I have nephews and nieces that still some of them still work in that mill...today.

But I don't talk with them that much, I just don't see them that much, you know. A lot of them have moved. But all...three of my brothers—my brother, youngest, well next to the youngest brother died in a mill in Greenwood. Had a heart attack in the mill at 37. One of them...they all three worked until up in their forties, probably, and it is just something that you know, it is just like growing up again when you go back and see the mill and talk with them and some of the houses are not there anymore, they are gone, torn down. But still you know, brings a lot of things back.

Pg 49-52
SH: From Mr. Berges, and he...it was just more than he could take care of. It was time we had about oh a hundred and something head of cattle over there...(cut) On the sidewalk at Chacoata Mill where daddy was killed they said that a policeman shot him on the ground but from the angle of daddy's shots it had to come from a mill winder.

And we complained about it...because this is where we had to go to get groceries, and to do all our errands at town. And nobody would do anything about it until years later. Probably I was around ten...eleven. And they came and took those two sections up, where daddy's blood run and replaced it.

Two new sections...but I now in the meantime my mom would not go that way. She would go, if she had to go shopping and we walked to do everything, we had no car, she would go all the way around behind the mill, to keep from going up that way to see this place.

But it was very disturbing and not only we complained about it—a lot of the neighbors you know, there were people constantly come to look at it when it was raining or wet weather and we just wanted it removed because it was a constant reminder every time we went up that way.

But they did replace it years later after we went through all that. They replaced it and put in new, new cement. But it was very disturbing to have look at that.

Question: Do you think when they replaced the cement that...were they paving over a certain kind of a history? What did they also remove?

SH: Well you know, after all the years that we tried to get them to do this my brothers had tried to get them to do it because they knew mom didn't want to go by
it. They didn’t respond…and I really don’t know why they waited so late or why they you know, replaced it. They really didn’t care about you know, the…the history of it I don’t think or anything. And that at that time Mr. Beecham was no longer there…so somebody heard our request I guess and replaced it. I don’t know.

Question: After they replaced it did your mom still…did she finally walk by there…
SH: She did. She did when...we were concerned about her going behind the mill to go to town because it was it was a grown up area. And wasn’t very safe and when they replaced this then mom didn’t go to town very often but when she did she would go that way...But I am sure she still had memories, you know, even seeing the new sidewalk...she knew where daddy fell.

Question: I wonder at the same time you wanted them to replace the sidewalk, did they have some conflicting feelings about painting it over too?  
SH: Not really. We just you know, we we thought about it so much and it was like a dread feeling of going by to see this...it was like—I remember walking to school after I started in school in fourth grade I would go uptown to school. And I saw this you know,...
Interview with Blanche Willis – African American female textile mill worker

BW: As a matter of fact, the white women would get together and they had clubs. And they made a rule that all of 'em would pay $15, whatever they paid. They would have clubs and they would meet in those clubs and they would, ah, ah, de-- they would discuss this issue and they would all vole that there wouldn't one pay any more. Wouldn't do any good to stop one and go to the other, because they had already made this rule that whoever hired a black domestic servant, they weren't gonna pay 'em over $15. And they all stuck to that.

GS: Now going way back, though, before any blacks worked in the mill, could you tell us what they did in the mill village and did you live in this -- were you born in this town?

BW: Yes, I was born in this town and I think I stopped in the eighth grade, goin' to the ninth. And as a matter of fact, my mother was old and I had two little nephews and all of 'em left me at home and I had to stop wo-- school and go to work. And I went to work for a well-known family that some of the people that my mother had washed for, she was a wash lady. At those days when she was able, she'd go to they houses on very cold days and I would go with her, and sometime it would be so cold she would put on a plank and make a fire and we'd have to run a old
Blanche Willis, Cannon/Fieldcrest, Kannapolis, NC, Box 16

Note: There are three interviewers are GS, K and JH – BW is Blanche Willis

Pg. 17-23

GS: Now going way back, though, before any blacks worked in the mill, could you tell us what they did in the mill village and did you live in this—were you born in this town?

BW: Yes, I was born in this town and I think I stopped in the eighth grade, goin' to the ninth. And as a matter of fact my mother was old and I had two little nephew and all of 'em left me at home and I had to stop wo—school and go to work. And I went to work for a well-known family that some of the people that my mother had washed for, she was a wash lady. At those days when she was able, she'd go to they houses on very cold days and I would go with her, and sometime it would be so cold she would put on a plank and make a fire and we'd have to run a old washpot with a fire around it and we'd have to run there and warm our hands, even heat the water that we washed with and put it in a tub. With a little board, we'd rub. And I would help her to do that. And some days after she finished and had to washin' and boil 'em in a pot and take 'em back in another washwater, and wrench 'em in two wrenchwaters. And then we would ring 'em out and then hang 'em on the line. And sometimes it would be so cold out there that the clothes would freeze before we could put the clothespin on 'em.

GS: Now could you tell—

BW: Yes. Well, as I say we went and did the washing. We washed for people in the mill village. It was up at North Kannapolis and my mother would git out and it was so cold sometime-I've already expressed that and explained that.

BW: As a matter of fact, we did the washin’. They had what they called “washwomen”, the washwomen. And my mother, after stopped farmin’, she decided to do—make her livin’ washin’. And so we would go to their houses. They would have a cook inside that stayed there and did the cookin’. I was small at that time, and she did that for a number of years and she got sick and she couldn’t work anymore. That’s the reason I had to stop high school and go to work. And sometime, ah, it would be so cold when we would go there and everything, but they had housekeepers and I started housekeepin’. I went to this family, a permanent family, and, ah, they were payin’ the people that stayed on the lot. There were those that came from other counties here to Kannapolis and they would stay all—just live there and maybe get a few hours off on Sunday and a few hours off at night, and I went to work for this permanent family because I was needy and my mother couldn’t work anymore. And I stayed there on the lot, ah, and, ah, did the work and tended to the baby and did all the washin’ and the ironin’ and she would come and pick me up at 4 o’clock on Sunday afternoon and bring me back around 4 or 5 o’clock on Saturday. That’s the only time that I got, and I was a young girl just outta high school. And they only paid $15 a week and I worked what you might say 6 days a week [and] I had the whole responsibility to look after the house. [They] had a very sweet little girl that was real—

BW: Let me see now. Let me get it together.

K: You didn’t make $16 at that time, not back in the 30s. I believe you said it was

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like $3.50
BW: I believe it was $3. I got 50 cents a day.

GS: That’s right. You got 50 cents a day.
BW: Fifty cents a day.

GS: That’s right.
BW: And I worked 6 days—well, I worked 7 days you might say, because she would come on Sunday afternoon around 4 and pick me up and take me there, and I stayed until Saturday evenin’ around 4 o’clock. And I—I, ah, made 50 cents a day.

GS: Now if somebody asked you right now, way back then when the white people, women, were working in the mills and the white men were working in the mills, who looked after their children, what would you say?
BW: I would say we—we looked after the children.

K: Uh hum.
BW: Black women looked after the children. I have a number of families of the children that I’ve worked at when I—before I stayed on the lot. Durin’ when the school was out, I would go and stay at night and stay on the lot and tend to the children while they worked. And I would do the cookin’ and washin’ and ten to little babies, and I have a number of ‘em that are very proud of me today and I’m proud of them.

GS: What did you get paid?
BW: I got paid 50 cents a day. Fifty cents a day.

BW: Five days a week before I stayed on the lot—well, the first place I worked durin’ the summertime, I would get off on Saturday because they got out of the mill on Saturday, but, you see, this place where I stayed all the time, these were business folk, I guess you’d call ’em, more educated people and they had better jobs. They weren’t workin’ in the mill. They worked in the factory.

BW: No, I’ve never seen anything like that because—

GS: Could you talk about how the white women got their babies looked after?
BW: Well, they—they had black women that stayed there all the time. Some came from the neighborin’ counties, like Monroe and places like that, and they came here and made their homes there. They had a little shack or a little car shed outside and they had a little place built [?] over the car shed where the black women stayed. And they stayed there at all times and they looked after the children and did all the work. But there were those of us that went [ ] the job, the older ones—my sister stayed at the lot—[?] lot and looked after the children while they worked, done all they work. And there are others that came from neighboring cities and just stayed there all the time and looked after the children and did the work. And they worked in the mill and all they had to do was come home and rest or go to bed or whatever they wanted to do because all of they work was done and they paid them a small amount of money. We were proud to get that because that’s what they were payin’ for us at that time.

GS: How did you feel that you saw these people going into the ills making a lot more than you made? How did you feel about that?
BW: Well, I knew they didn’t allow us in the mill. They didn’t allow us around the mill. They didn’t allow us—they had a train station. They had a place aroun’ here.
colored and everything else was integrated(?)—colored and I just knew that I couldn’t get in there and they didn’t allow us in there and I just did the best—we did the best that we could. That’s all we knew, because we knew they didn’t allow us in there and we couldn’t go in there. There were very few black men that worked in there at that time.

GS: But you’re such a proud, independent person and yet you’ve live through that. What kept you going? What gave you the spirit?

BW: and then it fell to me, the work of the white people. And I was just proud. I was just proud to make an honest livin’. And as the time grew on, I could do more and then I said then, “I don’t want my children to come up livin’ the life that I live. I don’t want ‘em to have to look down, ah, to the white people. I want ‘em to be able equal with ‘em. And I want ‘em to to have the same education that they had.” And it was a struggle, but anything that you want to do, I’m a witness that you can do it if you have a determination to do that.

Pg 25-27
GS: Now tell us about your husband, the job he had, because he had a long time in the mill and he was one of the few blacks that ever got in that mill.

BW: Well, they hired blacks. They started continually hirin’ blacks, but they had to stay on the outside. They would box the—got all this cotton in in bales and they would have to work on the—got all this cotton in in bales and they would have to work on the—on the cotton shoot, or the platform, or whatever they called it, and my husband worked in the waste house where he had to separate waste. And most recently, before he, ah, was entitled to a new job, he was a janitor. He had to clean cuspidors and he kept the floors clean. He cleaned the, ah, ah, fountains in the places where the white folk worked, and he wasn’t even allowed to take a drink of water out of that fountain. He’d have to carry a bottle in his pocket and drink his water and it had a—

BW: Well, the only—only places that they could work, the black men could work, was where the white men and nobody else would work. And that’s what they were hired, for the lowest class job. He worked in the coal shoot. He told me he’d have to shovel coal. I guess they must have had a locomotive in there that carried the material out or something. And then he worked in the waste house and sorted the waste. He said it was very dusty. And then he started (?) they put him as a janitor. They put him in the mill. He (?) an elevation then. He got inside the mill and he was a janitor and he, ah, cleaned and mopped the floors and he cleaned the water fountains and the bathrooms. And they had a sign, he told me, over the water fountain “White Only” and he cleaned the water fountain, but he could not drink out of it. He had this Coke-Cola bottle. At that time we had (?) Coke Cola bottles, you see, and he carried one of those in his pocket and whenever he was cleanin’ the water fountain, he would fill it up with the water for him to [drink?]. And then he would go somewhere else. He wasn’t [allowed?] to stand out there and drink it. And he cleaned the bathrooms, the men and the women. And, ah, he couldn’t even use the bathrooms while he was in there cleanin’ the bathrooms. They had people checkin’ on every now and then to see what they were doing.

GS: But tell us about eventually what he did. He got to be a machinist and all of that later on.

BW: Well, after the integration, he, ah—I think he ran some kind of cloth machine. I don’t know just what it was. At that time I wasn’t allowed to go in there. And, ah, I cain’t remember, but as he would see other jobs that he liked better, that was on the board—they put ‘em up on the board—that he was able to do, you know, with
his and his mind, he would—they would elevate him that way. And that’s what he was doin’, runnin’ a cloth machine, when he, ah, retired. And that was a good experience. That was a nice experience for him to be able to work with other people and all people were there together and he could do somethin’ that everybody else was doin’, not just sittin’. They would have to sit in under the steps when they finished. They couldn’t be seen when they was a janitor, but then he could take a little break with the other men and they became quite friendly and he accumulated a lot of friends.

Pg 29-31
BW: There were only black men workin’ at that time and they did the odd jobs, I understand, runnin’ the scrubbin’ machines and what-have-you, but my brother worked in the bleachery and he had something by my uncle bein’ a well-known man here, and pretty wealthy. I—I don’t think he had those kind of jobs to do, but he took my brother in the mill with him and that’s where he started in 1921 at 14 years old. And my uncle brought us here and it was a new house up here on Texas Road. We came from Concord and we lived there and my brother worked in the mill. And my mother had sharecrop with these friends that I told you she came up with the white family. And they lived down there and now we’re very close friends. And, ah, after stopped—after she quit doin’—after she stopped that sharecroppin’, she learned that the girls could work in the factory hills, you know, for the white people in their hoes and cook and look after they children and what-have-you. So she stopped doin’ cotton patches and doin’ that kind of work and ah they—she started—they worked and some of us stayed on the lot, they called it. And she started a-goin’ to the people’s, white people’s, house washin’. That’s when that came in, and that’s the way we made our livin’. We did that. She did that until I was grown and, ah, they still couldn’t go in the mill and they still had to do that. There were very few people that were educated, but they were educated in my—in the Lutheran school. And they had their own school, the Lutheran Church, and they could not teach in the public schools, the black people. The only—the only school that they could teach, at a black school.

BW: The blacks did not live in the mill village. They lived in this section in the other isolated black section. We didn’t live in the white section. And as a matter of fact, they were very few families that live here. This section was called Texas, and they had one, which is there now. It’s called Bethel. I think it was named because of the church, Bethel Church. And they were very few black people around. Well, everybody stayed in the black village, what few they were. It wasn’t as large as it is now. They was only 10 or 12 houses in this section.

K: There was, ah, a village, a little Cannon village. I guess about in 1954 they had about 25 houses they had for the blacks—the blacks to rent. I think they had about three rooms and a bath.

BW: Oh, yes, they—they had—yes. My brother lived in this place that they called Georgia—what was that? They had a place called Georgiatown. Right where East First Street goes through, the Cannon Mill had little houses. They were little three-room houses, a little kitchen and a little tiny bedrooms, two little tiny bedrooms and an outdoor toilet. And, ah, they had—had several of them in different sections, very small. And, ah, most of the people that worked in the mill lived there. There were only a few people that owned they homes at that time.

Pg 33-34
BW: Well, all the surroundin’ at the mill and uptown belonged to Cannon Mills, belonged to Mr. Cannon. The whole city belonged to Mr. Cannon until Mr.
Murdoch bought it out. And when I was young, we didn't have any other way of recreation at Christmastime, anything to do. And, ah, they would invite us up there at the YMCA and let us come once a year, and they would show us a picture, a cartoon picture, and they would fill the bag with goodies and give it to us, all that was a certain age. And that was the only thing that we had forward—had to look forward to as children.

GS: Was there anyplace in town where you felt that couldn't go, that you didn't feel at ease to go into shopping and so forth and places that you did? Could you talk about that? And were there black businesses or not?
BW: They weren't any black businesses. They were ladies' stores and, of course, they knew you couldn't afford to pay the price for what they had, and they wouldn't even come and wait on you. They wouldn't even service you. If you went in there, they looked at you like you was a wild animal or something...

BW: I— I don't know why, as a matter of fact, they just didn't have black people, women, in the mill. We weren't allowed in there and they didn't hire us. The only thing we could do was just tend to the children and cook for 'em and do their wash and keep house. That's what we did. It wasn't just a thing that black women were allowed to work in the mill

BW: In the early 30s we weren't workin’ in the mill. There were no black women worked in the mill. And we worked for the people that worked in the mill, the mill villagers, and we took care of their house, took care of their children and did their work while they worked in the mill. That's what—that was our occupation at that time. We weren't—there weren't any black women in the mill. They did not hire black women in the mill. So we worked in the homes and took care of the children—cooked and washed and took care of the whole house. That was our job. Some of us stayed on the lot and stayed at night and some of 'em went and—and came back home, you know. I have worked and stayed the 8 hours and took care of the children and did all the work and then come when they got off at 3 o'clock, I came back home until the next morin'. And then I would go back on my job and continue my works, take care of the home, just as a housewife. You could call it just as a housewife, 'cause we did the housewife's job.

GS: What did they pay you/
BW: Well, when I last worked in the house I was makin' $15 a week.

BW: Back in the '30s I was makin’ 50 cents a day, $3 a week back in the '30s. And I also stayed on the lot 6 days and I made $3 a week, and they the people that I worked for would pick me up on Sunday afternoon—that’s when I got out of school and first started workin’—and they would take me to their house and I would stay there till the next Saturday evenin’ aroun’ 4 ‘o clock, when they off of their job and they'd bring me home. And I would get to stay at home one night per week, and I made $3 a week.

JH: What did you think of the mill village? Could you describe it? What did you think of the houses and the way the community worked?
BW: Well, ah, these people, they didn’t—they—they last—first people that I worked for, they had office jobs. The first people when I stayed all night and made $3 a week, they had office jobs. And, ah, of course, we have different communities and different types of people now and different sections of where the worked, but these people had office jobs, the first—when I got out of school and went to work.
BW: My last 8 years, when I was 57, I went to work in the mill, and I worked in the tabulatin’ department. I was helpin’ to take care—clean up the tabulatin’ department. We dusted and emptied the wastecans and there were those that did the bathrooms. It was a very nice clean job and we had—we worked with—white and black were workin’ together. There were some white that worked with us, too, when I went in the mill, did the same job that I did.

Well, we didn’t have any recreations. We just got out in the yard and played ball with each other and, ah, as a matter of fact, we had a creek that ran down through, ah, the community. And, ah, my brothers and the younger children, girls, we’d go down there and fish and they would stop the creek up and that’s where they learned to swim, my brother that’s 18 months older’n me. We grew up together. We didn’t have no recreation facilities whatsoever.

BW: Well, so far as I know, they had movin’ picture shows, movin’ picture theaters to go to, and they had parks to play in. And we had none of that. We played in the street, played ball in the street or out in the field in front of our house. We had no recreation facilities.

BW: Well, we didn’t go to the mill. They jus—they let us go up to the YMCA for recrea—a few hours of recreation at Christmastime. We didn’t know what was in the mill or we didn’t go around the mill. And they let the children, the black children, of this community go up to the YMCA and they would show us a picture and they would give us a bag of goodies at Christmastime and that was a great treat to us. We only got to do that once a year.

JH: Talk about when things began to change for black women [in] regards to employment.

BW: Yeah, I was hired as a domestic servant and I had worked that 17 years when the women started goin’ into the mill. And I continued my domestic work until I was 57 and I went into the mill and worked 8 years until I was 65, and then I came out and I haven’t worked since. I retired.

JH: What was it like going into the mill and working on a job after all that?

BW: Well, I was just happy to get to go into the mill. It wasn’t anything strange to me because I didn’t—I didn’t run into the—operate a machine or anything. I was one—I helped to clean the office, a big office where the people worked, and we, ah, went in at 5 and got off at 1 and we would clean the offices and dust them and sweep them and get them prepared, ah empty the wastecans.

BW: My husband was workin’ there while we were datin’, while we were courtin’. Before we even married, he was workin’ in the mill and he stopped workin’ in the mill, I guess, in 1941 and he went into World War II. We weren’t married at that time. And then when he came home in ’45—

BW: he worked in a coal chute. He told this other guy there that he unloaded boxes and the main thing, he was a janitor. He cleaned the cuspidors and, ah, he helped to clean the offices, clean up, and the water fountain. And they weren’t allowed to drink from the water fountain at that time because they had a sign up “White Only” and they would carry a bottle, a Coke-Cola Bottle and he’d leave out of that area and go somewhere to drink it.
BW: After the integration, my husband was able to get a better job. He was able to go into the cloth room and run the cloth room cloth machine. He ran—worked with the cloth machine and he ran that machine. And, ah, I believe that’s what he retired from. He was able to do other jobs that was in the mill other than just bein’ a janitor.

JH: How’d you feel about that?
BW: Oh, I felt very happy. I felt very proud of him because I knew he had a better job and he was makin’ more money.

GS: Were you angry that he could have done that most of his life?
BW: Well, I didn’t know any better because non of the rest of the black people could do any more, and so he was just one of the black men that was—went over there and did what they was hired to do.
Interview with Lucille Thornburg

LT: -- that everybody would enjoy. Uh huh. And, see, he has it chronicled here like from 1926 to 1936.
C: Uh huh.
LT: And then he has it 1921 --
DIRECTIONAL
LT: -- to 1925.
C: Did he write about the strike?
LT: I don't think there's anything in here particularly. He -- he -- naturally, he had the nationwide textile strike, but anything about the Cherokee strike, in particular --

MACHINERY SOUNDS, DIRECTIONAL

GS: Lucille, the first thing I want you to tell us about is the -- about where your family came from and how you got into the cotton mill. First, you know, how old you are and all of that.

DIRECTIONAL
LT: Well, we lived and I was born up in Jefferson County about 2 miles east of Strawberry Plain. My father had a, oh, at that time was considered a rather large farm and also a little grocery store. His was the only grocery store in a five-mile radius around there. So we knew all the neighbors and all the mail was delivered at his store. The mail, you see, at that time, at the time I was born in 1913, the mail was delivered by horse and buggy. And...
Lucille Thornburg, Knoxville TN, Box 20

Note: There are two interviewers are GS JH – LT is Lucille Thorburg

Pg.4-6
LT: Well, we lived and I was born up in Jefferson County about 2 miles east of Strawberry Plain. My father had a, oh, at that time was considered a rather large farm and also a little grocery store. His was the only grocery store in a five-mile radius around there. So we knew all the neighbors and all the mail was delivered at his store. The mail, you see, at that time, at the time I was born in 1908, the mail was bein’ delivered by horse and buggy. And the buggies couldn’t go through all those muddy field, so they left the mail there at my father’s store and all the people would come there to get their mail. We knew who was writin’ to who because we saw all the mail around there! (laughs) That was something that we really enjoyed, people coming to get their mail. He usually got there about 1 o’clock in the afternoon to make that round of Route 1, Strawberry Plain.

GS: Now tell us why and how your family got into town.
LT: My mother—you ask me now why we got into town. Ah, we lived so far—well, it seemed at the time—of course, it’s only 18 miles out of Knoxville, but at that time, with the roads and all, it seemed like a long ways from Knoxville. And my mother wanted the children to be educated. And she wanted to move and my father did, too. They wanted to move to where the children—there was six of us—where they would have better schools. It was a very bad mistake. They made a mistake in sellin’ the store and the farm up there, because when we moved to Knoxville my father bough a store over on the corner of Ather and Unaka (?) street. And he set up a store there and tried to run it like he had in the country, with creditin’ everybody and, needless to say, he couldn’t make it that way. So he soon went out of business there and started workin’ in a meat market for somebody else.

GS: And what about you?
LT: Well, at that time when we moved to Knoxville, I was, ah—I went to school for a little while. Only got through the seventh grade. And by that time I was getting’ old enough to work. So the only—I had no skills, no training, so the only place I went to work—and I started workin’ at the Appalachian Mill.

I went to school through the seventh grade and then I had to go to work. My father couldn’t make a livin’ for all that big family there, so all of us older kids—I had two sisters older and a brother older—and we all started workin’ in the mill...

Pg. 9
LT: In 1924, when I was 16 years old, I started workin’ at the Appalachian Mill as a cone winder operator. Now on that machine, that was a long machine, it had about 50 spindles on it and I was windin’ threads from a cone up to a spool. There wasn’t a clock in the room. I didn’t have a watch and I didn’t know what time it was. So about 9 o’clock I thought it must be time to go home. That was the longest day that I can ever remember. And I remember, very definitely, eating my lunch at 10:30 because I thought it must be lunchtime. It wasn’t lunchtime. I still had to continue on until 12, until the whistle blew and most of us carried our lunch. And that was the shortest 30 minutes you’ve ever had, too. We would go outside the mill and sit on the steps and eat our lunch, but that was a long day. And when I started to thinkin’ about that, “From now till 4:30, can I make it, can I make it?” But I did make it and, of course, each day that got a little easier; you know.
GS: I'm going to go to something very different (unintell.) any background of cotton mills or anything like that. You just came out of the country. Did you have any conception of what you were getting into?

LT: Absol—did I know what I was doin' when I went into the cotton mill? No, I did not. It was just a way to, ah, help earn a living for the family. I had no ideas at all about, ah, ah, union labor. Now I had heard of the railroad strike in 1921, but there were—there wasn't any railroad workers living around where we were and there was very little in the papers about it. But I didn't know that they were even in the union. I thought they just quit work. I—I had no way of knowing anything about the labor movement.

GS: How did you parents regard you going into the cotton mill, because we've heard a lot of people saying, “The last thing I wanted for my daughter was to go into a cotton mill.”

LT: It was the last thing in the world that my parents wanted, for us to go into cotton mills. They wanted us to all continue going to school. My mother had visions of us going to university and college and graduatin' and becoming doctors and lawyers and all that. And that was a dream that was never realized.

GS: Why?

LT: Well, because of the Depression there and there was no way. As I said, my father couldn't make a livin' workin' in a butcher shop and in food markets around. And he had no other skills either. And my mother had been a—a cook and a dressmaker and they had no way of makin' a livin'. So it was up to us children to do that. We—we had to. We had to go to work.

The—at the Cherokee Spinnin’ Company there in 1933, where I was still working as a winding machine operator, but the end of my machine was near a window and right around the corner from that was the weave shop. And I looked out there one day and here's all these weavers sittin' out there in the afternoon—it wasn't their lunch hour—they were sittin' out there on a pile of lumber, just sitting there. And we all—I told everbody to run to the window and looked at 'em and we all wondered, “What are—what are they doing?” And we still didn't quite understand it, but I think now that they did gain something from that strike. I don't know what it was, but they never asked us to join 'em. That was just a weave shop. As you know, in the, ah, cotton mill, the weavers are the elite. They're the elite people, you know. People might not like to say, “Well, I'm a winder” or “I'm a spinner,” but they liked to boast, “I'm a weaver.” You know, “Are you workin' in a cotton mill? I'm a weaver.” That—that was the elite. That was the—that was the educated crowd, because I s'pose runnin’ a loom maybe was a little more complicated as a machine. But they preferred men weavers, too. They had a few women weavers, not many, not many. That was a—that was a man’s job, just like fixin’ the machines, that was. I learned to fix my machine and I asked my straw boss one day, I said, “Look, I know how to fix these machines. Why can’t I fix ‘em?” Because, see, they were gettin’ $12 a week and I was just gettin’ $8.40. And I wanted a job as a fixer. And he looked at me like I was—he said, “Are you crazy or somethin'? That’s a man’s job.” And no matter how good I was at fixin’ my manchine, I couldn't be a fixer.

Oh, yes. That's—that's when we got the 8 hours.

When the NRA came in, we got 8 hours then and our wages went up to $12.40 a week. That was great, but you know what an argument here in Knoxville was and it was in all the newspapers. What—wasn’t that gonna cause a crime wave or
wasn’t something gonna happen with those people with all that leisure time on
their hands? In fact, a newspaper reporter—I don’t think that’s in my scrapbook
anywhere, but a newspaper reporter came out to my house on day to ask, “What do
you do with all this leisure time?” We—that was time that we hadn’t had before
and they were really afraid of it, that we had that leisure time. And then we were
off on Saturday. So what a break that was there? We got the 40-hour week.

GS: Talk about that from the standpoint of mothers and children and so forth.
What big change did that make?
LT: Oh, that made a big change. That was a great change. The 8-hour day made a
great change. It made a great change in our life because after I started workin’ the
8 hours and gettin’ home so early in the afternoon with nothing to do, I started to
night school. I started to the old Knoxville High School and learned to type.

We had the— the NRA, of course, had given us the 8-hour day and we were makin’
the $12.40 a week, but still we had no job security, we had no better working
condition, and we thought at that time, too, when we heard about—when we
started to form our union and found out by associatin’ with railroad workers and
other—and construction workers what high wages they were gettin’, up to as
much as $3 an hour, why, we thought then, “Well, our wages are not so good.”
And then we had these weave shop people. And, as I said, they were the elite.
Everybody listened to them, and they started talkin’. “Well, if we had a union here,
we’d at least get a dollar an hour. We could do better than this if we had a union.”
So it was that and we never thought anything about any insurance or holidays or
any of those benefits. We wanted a clean restroom and we wanted a water fountain
that didn’t stay stopped up all the time and it was those kind of things that we
wanted. We were glad enough to get the $12.40, but there must be somethin’
better.

Oh, among the thing that we wanted after we got—after the NRA had given us the
40-hour week and the $12.40 weekly wage, there were conditions there that we
wanted and one of ‘em was we wanted a cleaner and a little bit bigger, ah, restroom
and we also wanted a water fountain that didn’t stay stopped up all the time,
because workin’ in the mill there you’d get very thirsty with that cotton and lint all
around you and you go back there to get a drink and the water fountain stayed
stopped up all the time. I don’t remember—so we started bringin’—I don’t think
any of us had a thermos, but you could everybody bringin’ little jar of water and
set up on the machine, because the water fountain was—and that was really
something that we all—that we all wanted. That was one of our demands when we
were drawin’ up our contract that we were gettin’ redy to negotiate before the
strike. That was one of the things that we had in there, that we would have a water
fountain that worked.

Pg. 21
LT: Yeah, I remember the man came by, one of the super patriotic guys, you know,
that we were, ah, ah, against the United States government and he wanted to walk
down there with the flag to show that we were all Americans. And somebody asked
him, I think, “Well, weren’t you born right here in Knoxville? We all were. Aren’t we
all Americans?” And, ah, something else that we had to think about along there,
too, was this is the Bible Belt and it was very Bible Belt at that time. You’ve
probably run into that in interviewin’ some of these people, that you run into that
Bible Belt, that was this the Christian thing to do? And with al the preacher and
the churches against us, it was might y hard to explain to the people that it was
the right thing to do, but , you know, there’s a Bible there. We got us up some
quotes, too, you know that we'd use. You know, “Lord helps them that help themselves.” We'd use that one a lot.

Pg. 27
LT: Well now, I talked about the churches bein’ against us. They were certainly not all against us. The Catholics were not. Ah, in fact they helped us in the undercover way and so did the Jews. The Jews provided us a place to meet. We met up over a tailor shop. Ah, so they were with us, but some of the very fundamentalist churches, and they had all kinds of signs out in the yard, you know, about “They’ll preach today on strikers goin’ to hell” or something along that line. But the itinerant preachers that were workin’ all week and preachin’ on Sunday, they—they were our good friend. And the first president of our local at Cherokee, ah, was a preacher, Preacher Campbell, and he was good. See, he’d been used to preachin’ out here on the street corners and he knew how to get up before a crowd and do that. So the preachers that were really good, we liked to have the preachers in there because they could tell ’em and people would believe them that you’re not goin’ to hell just because you’re strikin’. And they’d believe them where they wouldn’t believe me.

Pg. 52
LT: A lot of workers thought that President Roosevelt wanted them to organize. He never did say that, but a lot of the people believed and felt that he did say that and they was usin’ that for their protection, that “President Roosevelt is going to protect us.” We didn’t have that. We didn’t have him saying anything about that until Wagner Act, when they said—a clause in that “workers shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively without fear or discrimination.”

Pg. 1-4 (2nd folder in box 15)
JH: Why don’t we start with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. You were talking about him before, and don’t you tell us about how, as cotton mill people, what FDR did for all of you?

LT: Well, he did many things for the cotton mill people...

Okay. Ah, President Roosevelt did great things for the working people, ah, everywhere. Ah, for one thing, I think one of the greatest things that he did, it was, ah, a man in that...

President Roosevelt did many things for the workers in this country, but specifically for the cotton mill workers. And we were called “cotton mill hands” at that time. One of the things is I think he brought us a certain amount of dignity when became “textile workers” instead of “cotton mill hands.” And you know how we got that? We got that because we were given the right to organize. When we were given those rights it was like emancipation. We were told then, and we knew then, that we had friends and that somebody was telling us that we had a right to organize. We had never thought before that we had that right. In fact, we didn’t have that right. If we organized, we were fired. So we didn’t have the right, but when we got the right to organize, then we felt like that we had been freed, that we had something then that we could do for ourselves and not just have to do exactly what the bosses told us to do. It gave us emancipation from that. And that was one of the things that we’ve always been very grateful for, that we were now not completely in the hands of management and the bosses, but that we had a responsibility to ourselves because we’re free—we’re free to organize if we want to.
Ah, before President Roosevelt and the New Deal, we...

Before Roosevelt and the New Deal, we didn’t feel that we had any rights, but after we got our rights, the right to organize and to bargain collectively without discrimination, then we felt that we had been emancipated. We felt that we were free then. But one of the greatest things among textile workers was that we were no longer “lint heads” and “cotton mill hands.” Now we had become “textile workers.” I was never referred to as a textile worker; I was a winding machine hand. So that gave us a new title and we liked that. It gave us a little sense of dignity. While that might not mean anything to other people, it meant a lot to us in the cotton mills to become textile workers.

Section 7A was actually the legislation that gave us our rights. That was where we got our emancipation, when we were given the rights. And along with those rights we were given dignity. Well, we considered it dignity when we were no longer called “cotton mill hands” and “lint heads.” We were “textile workers.” I’d never been called a textile worker. I thought my only title was a “winding machine hand,” but under section 7A then we obtained dignity that we had never thought was available before.

Organizing in the textile mills didn’t really start with our 1934 nationwide strike. It had started earlier than that in places like Elizabethton, Marion, and Gastonia, North Carolina. But all their attempts over there were futile and no wonder they were. The bosses were against ‘em. We had no protection whatever, but when we got Section 7A, then we had protection and we felt that we had that right to organize, but we had not had that before. And naturally those strikes were lost over there because the employees, or the “cotton mill hands,” as we called each other then, as we were called then, ah, they were lookin’—they were thinkin’ all the time about the management. Management was their boss. And they have given ‘em a job and they were loyal to them. They thought they had to be loyal to them. But Section 7A, then they gave us protection and it was that protection that we used in our organizing efforts after that.

JH: What was the wedge in organizing then?
LT: Naturally, some—all the employees didn’t feel—they were not used to this protection. It was something new. So they still felt that they had to be loyal to their employer, to the boss and to the manufacturer there. They had to be loyal to him because he was the one who had provided them with a job. And the job meant everything to them. That was their livelihood and they felt that loyalty. So it took them a while to realize that we now had protection under Section 7A that we could organize without discrimination.

Pg 12-17
LT: When the—when the NRA and Section 7A came in, we were concerned, of course, about how it was going to help us. WE also had to think about how it was going to affect management, because the first thing we did at Cherokee, where I worked, we put some notices on a billboard down there that we were gonna have a meeting and the bosses came around right after that and tore them all down and we did—we knew then that they were not for what we were doing, which was tryin’ to do what we had been given a right to do under NRA and Section 7A.

Well, they didn’t. They didn’t comply with it. If they’d complied with it, we wouldn’t have had to have gone on strike. So they didn’t comply with it.
JH: How could they get by with that? Blue Eagles?
LT: Oh, yeah, we had Blue Eagles all over the mill, but, according to management, that still didn’t give us the right to organize. Even though it was a law, where it had said that we had the right to organize, bargain collectively without discrimination, the bosses didn’t think that that applied to them. And they were still, “We’re management. You’re our workers. You’re our hands.” And they—they were still of the same attitude. Our attitude and our definition of it was different from what theirs was.

JH: Did you listen to them?
LT: No. If we had listened to them, we never would have organized the union there. I knew that I was not going to work in a cotton mill all my life, that there must be a better world somewhere out there that I could fit into other than standin’ on my feet 50 hours a night for $8.40—a week. I knew that there must be a better life somewhere, so when the union came along and they started tellin’ me about how I could have shorter hours, better workin’ conditions, and higher pay, I went for that. And that’s all we talked about at that time was those three things. And I thought, “Just give me shorter hours, give me a little more pay, and it must be somewhere and it’s not here in this mill.”

I worked, ah, 50—my job at Cherokee Spinnin’ Company was on a winding machine. I would thread from a cone onto a spool, and I worked on the night shift. I worked 10 hours a night standing up and for that I got $8.40 a week. So I knew that there mus be—so when they came along and talked about the union—when this organizer came to town to talk to us about that, ah, we all thought at the time, and we still—and I still think we had nothing to lose. You lose $8.40 a week, what have you lost? That was for 50 hours. That’s right.

JH: The Textile Code changed your working hours and it changed your conditions?
LT: No, it did not change working conditions. It did not change that, but it did shorten the hours to 8 hours a week. And then we started getting’ $12.40 a week.

Well, actually, ah, working conditions did not change that much. We did have shorter hours, but our production was increased. See, where I was winding—where I was winding to get 70 pounds on my shift, then in that 8 hours I was still supposed to get that same amount. So your workin’ conditions didn’t —didn’t change any. You didn’t get any, ah—you did—we didn’t have any breaks. We didn’t have any more lunch hour—we didn’t have any lunch hour at all. So the conditions didn’t change that much. It changed enough and we—we appreciated it, of course. We were glad to get that, ah, 8 hours instead of the 10 hours. We were glad to $12.40 a week but still it was still that same hard work that we were doin’ before we organized.

JH: Was it harder work after the NRA than before?
LT: It was for a while. It was for a while. That was one of the arguments that we used in talking to our co-workers about joinin’ the union, that our workin’ conditions had not changed.

JH: Had they gotten worse?
LT: They were actually worse because you were supposed to produce the same amount of work in 8 hours that you’d been doing in 10.

Uh hum. Uh hum. Some of ‘em, where they were workin’ 12-hour shifts. We had 10-hour shifts at Cherokee.
Well, at Cherokee after we—after we had the NRA and after we got our 8 hours a day and our $12.40 a week, our working conditions didn’t change. We had to produce just as much in that 8 hours as we had in 10. And, as I understand it, at a lot of other places where they were workin’ 12-hour shifts, they had to do the same amount of work and produce as much of whatever it was they were producing, like thread in my case, ah they had to do the same amount in 8 hours. And I don’t know how management, ah, got by with that, but that was what we called “stretchout system.” It was. It was stretchin’ out your work. So actually we didn’t gain a whole lot there. We were appreciative of the, ah, shorter hours and the higher pay from eight up to twelve dollars a week, but still working conditions hadn’t change enough. If they had, I don’t know that we—that we could have organized if everything had just been run smoothly and we didn’t have to work as hard. But we were—we were workin’ harder. We were workin’ much harder and that was what we didn’t like, and that was on of the things that we wanted to join the union for.

Pg 20-26
LT: Ah, even though the, ah, NRA and Section 7A was in effect, still management was not living up to what the requirements were in those—in that legislation. And because of that reason, a lot of the workers, who weren’t even thinkin’ about joinin’ the union at the time, were concerned that management—they knew that much about NRA and Section 7A that they wanted to know why it wasn’t management living up to that code, and they were not living up to it. And they started writing letters to President Roosevelt and Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins and all those people in Washington to find our why—why aren’t they living up to this code. I remember very well that there were people then that wrote to their congressman about that who had never written o a congressman before. I remember ‘em showin’ me letters. “Look, I got a letter from my congressman. I got a letter from my congressman because I’ve—I’ve written to him and, look, I got a letter.” It was—it spread. They—they thought—they didn’t think about doing anything locally because they were thinkin’ that President Roosevelt and all this New Deal legislation, and rightfully so, that was what had given them their rights and their protection. So they sent their letters to Washington to the President, the congressmen, senators and all.

The workers and al of the co—my co-workers there, we all sent our letters to Washington. We sent ‘em to our congressmen and to our senators because we didn’t trust the people that was on the NRA Appliance Board...

I think that most of the letters addressed to the President and the congressmen.

Ah, my co-workers and myself, too, of course, we were writing letters all the time. We would write ‘em to President Roosevelt, to Mrs. Roosevelt, to our congressman, to our senator, and to Hugh Johnson complaining about management not bein’ in compliance with the Textile code and with the NRA regulations. And we didn’t know where else to go because we didn’t trust the—the state compliance board, because it had been staffed with people who were in the textile industry and we didn’t trust those people. So we sent our letters to Washington and we did hear later that our letters that were sent to these representatives in Washington were ferreted out to Hugh Johnson, who was head of the NRA. But we—what we were concerned about was tryin’ to get these people in compliance with these codes. We had read enough. We knew what the codes were and we knew that management was not going by the codes.

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Many of our people, our textile workers, had never written to a congressman before. In fact many of 'em had not even voted before that time, because when—up until we got rid of the poll tax laws here, it costs $2 to pay for a poll tax and durin’ Depression years the people didn’t vote. So a lot of ‘em didn’t even know until that time, but they certainly became interested in who their senators and their congressmen and who their representatives in Washington were when they saw all these violations of the NRA and the Textile Code.

Oh, I wrote—I wrote letters to the congressman and senators all along. I would report conditions even where I was working, but there was nothing they could do about it at that time. There was no laws. The man who owned the factory run the factory the way he wanted to run it. But I did. I’ve always been a letter writer.

Yes. Yes. We—we thought that we had these elected representatives in Washington and that if we wrote to them that something would happen. We definitely did. We thought something would happen. And particularly when we got answers back from the letters.

Oh, yes, and other workers there who had never written to their congressman before was showin’ me the answers that they got from their representative in Washington. And usually those letters—I think they all said the same thing, that they would investigate it, just a real political letter.

JH: Did they investigate, Lucille?
LT: not that I know of. I don’t think they did, but times did get better. Things did change. The stretchout system, that was cut into very deeply. They stopped the stretchout system and then later I think we had a l—I’m sure we did. Of course, I didn’t get to go back to the mill after the strike, but, as I understand it, they are given a luncheon break—lunch breaks and maybe coffee breaks, but we didn’t have that. So things did change. Maybe their letters helped.

Roosevelt was very respected. He was Little God. Roosevelt was—and particularly when he brought—when we had all this legislation that was for protection and security and then when he brought TVA here, all that New Deal legislation, Roosevelt was absolutely worshipped. Well, you know because he was elected—re-elected four times.

Where we got the idea of writing to Roosevelt was we would hear this over the radio, you know, in that very, very nice voice that he had, “If you have any problems, you can always refer ‘em to your President.” Well, we took him at his word and sent the letters direct to him and maybe they were effective. We—we thought that they were.

A lot of those boards didn’t do anything, but I don’t think that was Roosevelt’s fault. I think he appointed ‘em, you know, to do good. But they didn’t. I don’t know why.

Well, it could have been and maybe they were contributin’ heavy to a political kitty, even Roosevelt, but still, I think he’s the greatest President that’s ever been. I don’t think we’ll ever have anybody to match him.

JH: Do you remember voting for him in that 1932 election?
LT: Oh, yes, yes, I remember voting for him, but at that time we had to have a poll
tax receipt to take to the polls with you see, we hadn’t done away with the poll tax at that time so it was real interesting. I don’t remember exactly what year the poll tax went out, but I know the voting went up and I know people who had never paid their poll tax before, in order to vote for Roosevelt the second term, they got the $2 all right to go vote for Roosevelt. Of course, he was elected with those landslides, you know, all the way through.

JH: What about the first term when he took over from Hoover?
LT: I remember when Roosevelt was elected—you know, we had talked about that Hooverville and, ah, all these little, ah, soups and how people were livin’ and all that? And if you remember what Roosevelt’s them son was, “Happy Days Are Here Again.” Well, we took him at his word. Happy days are here again, and all the way through when we went to the polls to vote for him we were all singin’ “Happy days are here again because Roosevelt’s goin’ in.” And, sure enough, he did, you know, with a landslide.

JH: Can you sing it?
LT: No. No! You sing it!

JH: Come on, Lucille.
LT: No, I cain’t sing it, but it was—uh uh. Let’s see, I’ve forgotten even how it goes, but we were singin’ that, you now, ah, it…

That was a great song, though, and people believed him. You know, we—we were in such dire depression and that was kind of an uplifting song, “Happy Days Are Here Again.” And people believed him and, sure enough, they were. No wonder people worshipped Roosevelt.

Pg 7-10
LT: Well, lookin’ the boss in the eye was one thing, and something else, too, that you could notice of women in particularly in our union, which most—most—most of our members were women. Ah, that they would never have thought about getting up on their feet in any kind of a meeting to speak. And they gained that when they found out that they also knew something about unions and that they had some power. They’d get up in the Central Labor Council and speak and talk. I thought that was the greatest change that I saw in ’em, was havin’ that courage to—to speak in public, where they had not been—done that before. Like some of ’em said—I asked one woman, I said, “I never heard you speak before,” and she had made a real talk in the Central Labor Council. She says, “Well, I never had anything to say before.”

She said, “I never had anything to say before, and I think really what she meant was there that she felt like that she had no influence and now power, but the way she put it was she said, “I never had anything to say.” She was afraid to say what she was thinkin’, of course, to her boss and, ah—but with all the news laws and bein’ in the union and knowin’ that she had the backin’ of her co-workers there, she had the courage to stand up and talk. To me, that was a great achievement.

JH: Had most of these workers ever belonged to anything other than the church before?
LT: No. No. No. These mill workers... Ah, most of us who worked in the mill, and particularly the women, had never belonged to any organization or agency other than their church before. Ah, we had a few that might belong to an Eagles auxiliary or maybe one somewhere that belonged to, ah, a veterans’ organization or
something like that, but they had—they had not belonged to anything except church and, of course, their pastor was a man and they weren’t used to women even talkin’ in church. So they’d had a lot—I think, like this woman said. She said, “I never had anything to say before.” She—she didn’t have an opportunity really to—to say anything before a crowd. Where—where would she have had it? She couldn’t do it in church. She didn’t belong to any other organization, but when she got in the Labor Movement and felt right at home with her co-workers, then she had that courage and—and certainly the knowledge to get up and express herself.

In the mill we couldn’t—we? In the mill we couldn’t be anything but a machine operator listenin’ to the boss, but in the union we could hold an office, we could be a delegate to the Central Labor Council, we could speak our peace, and it gave us a—a new freedom. A lot of those women thought—maybe I was one of them—that you—you just don’t get up in public and say what you—what you want to say. But when you’re surrounded with your co-workers and you know most of them are thinkin’ the same way you are, then you have that—that courage and you want to, to get up. If you have an opinion, you want to express it.

JH: What was the biggest obstacle to having all of you go out on strike?
LT: Well, we—we—I—I think actually the biggest obstacle that we had, ah, in goin’ out was the families of the strikers and the neighbors. See, there was a lot of families where there’d just be one person in that family that belonged to the union. And since that person wasn’t very well acquainted with the union themselves, because we hadn’t been organized long enough, ah, they were havin’ to think about, ah, their church was against ‘em. And their members of their family was against ‘em, and the neighbors. So we had to overcome that. And I think in a way it took a lot of courage for those people, ah, that in spite of the church, in spite of the neighbors, and in spite of the family members, who were opposed to organized labor, or thought they were—they didn’t know enough about it to be really opposed, but what they were thinkin’ about more than anything else was losin’ that paycheck. See, this was Depression days. Those people didn’t have any money and to lose a paycheck there, they had to face all that and, of course, themselves, they were thinkin’ about, “There won’t be a paycheck next week.” That—that was a big obstacle.

JH: How did you local deal with that…
LT: No. No. No. We didn’t—we didn’t have any money. We didn’t have anything to set up a—any sort of a soup kitchen or anything like that, and we did not get any strike benefit from anywhere. Now, ah, many of us had friends, ah, who would give us things like a bag of apples or maybe a—some meat or something like that. That was just friends givin’ it to us, but we—we didn’t have anything like that. And that’s why those people were fearful of a strike. “What are we gonna eat?” It was—it was down that far, that if you go out on strike you’re gonna get hungry, which certainly was possibility and did happen in cases.

JH: What was the day-to-day life on the picket line?
LT: Ah, well, at first…At the first, like the first few days on the picket line it was fun. Oh, that’s fun, ah, ah, carryin’ these banners. But as time went on an by the end of the week, no paychecks comin’ in—by the end of the week it—it wasn’t so much fun. And the crowd had dwindled some, not significantly that first week, but everybody that could, of course, was findin’ a job somewhere else, because they—
they needed a paycheck. There was nothing to eat, nothing to pay the rent with. So the ones that could were findin’ jobs other places. Of course, there was very few jobs. There was very few that, ah, we left and some had begun to move away. If they could afford the moving price, they would move to somewhere over in North Carolina, ah, where a mill was still open, and to try to get jobs there. So, ah, regardless of what some people might think, a picket line is no fun. You’re usin’ the only weapon that you have and it’s—it’s—it’s really not a fun thing at all. It was a very serious matter to be carryin’ that picket sign and, of course, we had a change in that every day, not havin’ the same people do the walking up and down, and we’d change ‘em three or four times during the day, for that matter. Okay.

One of the songs that we—that Miles Horton introduced us to, in fact, I think it was the only one because it had so many verses we tried to learn it all, and that was that well-known song of “Solidarity Forever.” And the way that one goes is, “When the union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run, there can be no greater power anywhere beneath the sun. Yet what force on Earth is feeblener than the feeble strength of one? But the union makes us strong.” Then we’d go into, “Solidarity, solidarity, solidarity forever.” And it was a catchy tune and they liked it and they—I think everybody learned that song, because it had a sort of marching tune to it. And Miles introduced that one to us. And we made copies of it by hand to give to everybody so everybody would have it. And then they’d bring ‘em to the picket line and we’d all sing it.

Pg. 27-30
LT: Oh, we did when a group of us were together that no—none of the fundamentalists were listenin’, we might have. But—we didn’t—we didn’t use it in the meetings. That wouldn’t have been—they wouldn’t go for that at all. Well, se, we—we—we had—you must remember durin’ this strike, ah, we had all of these fundamentalists, as they call ‘em ‘right wing’ now—we had—we had all those preachers against us. And it was very hard to talk unionism and trade unionism and picket lines to people al week to have a preacher tear that down o Sunday, but that was what happened.

JH: What would those preachers say?
LT: Well, they would just talk to ‘em about loyalty, loyalty to the—the—they organization that’s “givin’ you a job” and things like, ah, “Whose bread I eat, his song I sing.” And, you know—and they compared all unions, that there might be violence. We didn’t have any violence, but violence could come of it. So it—it made it hard for us. Everthing we had done all week would be torn down on Sunday.

JH: What about the devil?
LT: The devil we—he was in the fundamentalist organization, so you had to watch out for him. (laughs)

PM: Why did the preachers do that?
LT: I don’t know. I have had some, ah, ideas. I don’t know, and knows for certain today, whether or not they were getting money from the manufacturers or not. We—we just don’t know. But they had some reason, ah, for doin’ that. And the only churches who really, ah, stood by us and helped in any way at all was the Catholics and the Jewish church. That was—that was the only ones. These fundamentalist churches and maybe the other Protestant churches just didn’t want to get involved.
JH: How did the Jews and the Catholics actually help you?
LT: Ah, they helped us...Ralph Chaplan, you know, was the old wobblies. He was the guy who wrote their songs. And then “Union Mate,” you know that one.

JH: “Union Mate” was then?
LT: Ah, I don’t remember. We didn’t—we didn’t—we didn’t have it to sing it, but that’s an old song, you know. “There once was a union mate who never was afraid.” I’ve forgotten the words, what’ the rest of the words—“never was afraid. Oh, you can’t scare me. I’m stickin”—we didn’t—we didn’t sing that one. Ah, that was to the tune of—I can’t think. I can’t find my Little Red Songbook. I looked for it last night.

JH: Can’t find it?
LT: No. It’s here somewhere in all this mess.

JH: How did that “Sweet By and By” song go with the lyrics—just the melody?
LT: Let’s see. 9singing) “Long-haired preachers come out every” (NO SOUND) “try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right. But when asked ‘How ’bout something to eat,’ they will answer in voices so sweet. ‘Work and pray. Live on hay. You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.” (laughs) (Inaudile).n Oh, Lordy. Now what else you got?

I—I—you know, I’m thinkin’ that song really—I think that must have—must—could possibly have been written by an atheist, because, see, he says, “The long-haired preachers come out every night, try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right.” They don’t give you anything to eat when you ask about somethin’ to eat. Ah, it—it’s a revolutionary song, for that matter, (laughs) but we didn’t sing that one.
Interview with Bruce Graham

Tape 219

Grahm: But you'll get this thing here. I worked this from here down to the road. All of that (S: "Uh hu.").

JAMIE: Dad, I need t...

Tape OFF/ON

Stoney: Looking at your overalls. The old brand for the overalls. Well, let's go back this way, then. Uh... How did you get your job in the mill?

Grahm: How did I get it?

Stoney: Uh, hu.

Grahm: Oh, I just... they started to...

Stoney: Want to, to sit here?

Grahm: Yeah. [Inaudible words] ... just went to, went to Mr. [Inaudible Name] and asked about a job and he give me a job. [Told 'im could I open, cou...] well, I first started to work, the first mill I worked at was...
Stoney: How did you get your job in the mill?
Grahm: How did I get if?

Stoney: Uh, hu.
Grahm: Oh, I just...they started to...

Stoney: Want to, to sit here?
Grahm: Yeah. [Inaudible words]...just went to, went to Mr. [Inaudible name] and asked about a job and he give me a job. [Told 'im could I open, cou... well, I first started to work, the first mill I worked at was Kramerton.

Stoney: Kramerton?
Grahm: Yeah. (S: “Yeah.”) Scrub. I left there and I went on to, I used to work the road, graze the road with mules, I done that. I left that, I went to the mill. And I got a job over in [inaudible words]. ‘At was the job with Stowe.

Stoney: At, uh, at Stowe? (G: “Uh, hu.”) Uh hu. And, who gave you that job? How’d you get it?
Grahm: I got it from [inaudible words] (S: “Uh hu.”) And, [Inaudible name] was superintendent.

Stoney: And were there any other black men in the mill?
Grahm: Yes. Yes. I had a brother worked there. He worked there before I did. That was Jake. He worked there. And, uh, [Jim Lang], he worked there, [Wane Hang], them about the only blacks that worked there when I first started. And then about when, uh, this eight hours come in, they went to hire more black people, then, in the mill. But still they didn’t pay them what they paid the white.

Stoney: Du, did you ever spin or weave or anything like that?
Grahm: Not in the mil, no I never did. I just [hoed] cotton. I was a cotton [hoer].

Stoney: Did, uh, were there any black spinners or weavers or loom fixers back then?
Grahm: Nope. Not in, not one, not in the mills I worked.

Stoney: Did you ever wonder why there wasn’t?
Grahm: I don’t know? Do you know? (They laugh.) I don’t know. Wonder why. (S: “Yeah.”) George, do you wonder why?

Stoney: I’ve, I have a pretty good idea.
Grahm: Well, what?

Stoney: They wanted to save the jobs for the white men.
Grahm: Oh, right. That’s what I think. I just lettin’ you say it first. [They laugh.] Yeah.

Stoney: Yes, I, I’m afraid that ws what it was.
Grahm: Yep.
Stoney: Yeah. [G: “Um, hm.”] Yeah. Uh, when, when you worked in the mills, uh, what was it like?
Grahm: What?

Stoney: Was it heavy work? Was it...
Grahm: [Oh, it was heavy work, it was work] when I first went there. You didn’t play around, you, I had hard jobs. I had to open the cotton and then clean it, pick it and then run it through a machine, run it through the pickin’ line. And I had hard jobs, I, I put in my eight hours. [Inaudible words].

Stoney: Yeah. And how did they treat you in the mill?
Grahm: I’ll tell you the truth, they treat me pretty fair, but they had, only thing I hate, you couldn’t drink out o’ the fountains, nothin’, pretty fountain in there, we had to go to the other, out there and drink [behind] the well. Treat us [pretty nice], they didn’t treat us [that what they should of treat us].

Stoney: Now, we found you in the phone book. But we first knew about you when we were going through the archives in Washington and we found this letter which you had written to the National Recovery Administration protesting the fact that you weren’t getting paid as much as you should be.
Grahm: Um hm.

Stoney: It says, “Bruce Grahm, Route 3, Gastonia, North Carolina. I’m an inside employee and required to work more than forty hours a week. I operate three machines, a waste feeder, waster beater and opener, [G: “Um, hm.”] and am paid less than fif, thirty cents per hour. So, my employer is due me extra compensation from July the seventeenth, 1933, up to the present date,” which was January the fifth 1934. And it’s got your signature on it. Uh, do you re...tell us, uh, how this got written and why
Grahm: Mm. I wrote that?

Stoney: Mm hm. It’s got...
Woman: Those are the words that you said {S: It’s...} when you signed it. Do you remember who told you to sign? Do you remember who asked you to sign that? And why?
Grahm: I just don’t remember.

Stoney: Now, the handwriting on the letter itself is very much like that of an...of another man in the mill...
Grahm: [Morter.]

Stoney: E. N. Wallace. [G: “Um, hm.”}. Do you remember Mr. E. N. Wallace?
Grahm: Yeah. Wallace, Wallace told me that.

Woman: He was the one that asked you to sign that piece o’ paper.
Grahm: Yeah. {S: “Uh hu.”}

Woman: Why did he say sign it? Why did he tell you to sign it?
Grahm: To get more money to get back time.

Stoney: Did you ever get back time?
Grahm: No sir.
Woman: You know you didn’t? They didn’t do anything about it?
Grahm: No.

Woman: That you remember?
Grahm: No, not that I remember.

Stoney: Now, the thing that interests me is that you got down here, “may we use you name if necessary” and you say “yes.” {G: “Um, hm.”} That took a lot o’ courage, to say that.

Woman: You were either really convinced of what you were saying or you didn’t know what you were saying. Now, we got to decide which one it was. [They laugh.]
Grahm: What? Tell me again.

Woman: O.k., when they said to you that you gonna to turn in this paper to, for you, to your employer, to say that, “you are not payin’ me fairly.” {G: “Uh, hu.”} That’s what the paper is sayin’. {G: “Uh, hu.”} And then it says, “now, when we go and take this paper to whomever, we gonna have to say that, uh, you signed it,” and they said, “O.k.” and they says, “now,” they say, “do you mind if we use your name,” and you says, “no, I don’t mind.” So, I’m sayin’ that took a lot o’ courage, so either you didn’t know what they were sayin’ or you really believed in what they were sayin’. So, we’re tryin’ to determine which one it was. [They laugh.] Did you really know what they were talkin’ about?
Person: No, no, [inaudible words].

Woman: In 1934, I mean, you were convinced that you weren’t makin’ enou, uh, the right amount of money?
Grahm: No.

Woman: You were convinced o’ that?
Grahm: Yeah.
Person: [He would know, maybe, about that.]

Woman: O.k. Well then, if he was convinced then he probably [inaudible words].
Stoney: Now, tell us about Mr. Wallace.
Grahm: Mm hm. Well, Mr. Wallace...

Woman: Oh, that’s so old, throw that junk away, don’t mess up that. [Inaudible words] get yourself into.
Grahm: Mr. Wallace, he dead and gone. Oh I know he was a good man, though. He, he wrote in, we got some money back.

Stoney: He did.
Grahm: Yeah. I don’t know how much, but he get money back, and I took that money back, you seethey didn’t believe that [inaudible words] in the machine shop, the just cut it our, and they’d get a man come from Gastonia, fix things when they need and hire, never did hire none of ‘em mechanics in that machine shop.

Stoney: Now, we have several letters from Mr. Wallace over, over a year, he kept protesting, and you see he finally got s, some back payy...
Grahm: Yeah.

Stoney: But then he lost his job. They just eliminated his job.
Grahm: Yeah, they [inaudible words] seems to have a good workd for them that fire him and that [inaudible words] in the shop. {S: “Yeah.”} And I was just say’inn’ how fine he was.

Stoney: That’s right, yeah, Now...
Grahm: Now he didn’t live too long after that. You know, he was livin’ on the mill hill when he done that and he build him a little house over there on the highway. And he, I don’t know how many years he lived in it, he took sick and he died.

Stoney: Did you have any dealing with him after that?
Grahm: Mr. Wallace? Oh, he come around. Mr. Wallace used to come have a little garden, would come over her and work a little garden. Oh, me and him were good friends. Wasn’t a better whit man friend in, I had in Mr. Wallace, Mr. Wallace. Mr. Wallace was a good man o me and to black people. He treated me [same, be a good man]. Yeah, he had a garden. He had one up there, worked at McLean, he’d come over here and me and him get off a work shift [inaudible words] and after he wrote that letter to them people that got out with ’em, and told ’im they didn’t need no more. [Inaudible words].

Stoney: So, he was through.
Grahm: Mm hm.

Stoney: When you were working in the mills, did you ever thing that there would be a time when they had white loom fixers and white s... I mean black loom fixers and black supervisors and that kind o’ thin?
Grahm: No, I didn’t. You mean, I’ve, [what, did I think that, uh]...we’d have black men oversee? No, I never did think much about that.

pg. 39-40
Stoney: Well, now, go back to 1934. Uh, I know that’s a long time, but at that time they were trying to form a union and they had a union in the Eagle. Did they ever talk to you about joining the union?
Grahm: [Well], some body come to me and I told him I wasn’t, wasn’t interested, I wouldn’t join. I don’t remember who it was. Yeah, they talked to me [inaudible word] but I wouldn’t [be] joinin’.

Stoney: Do you know why?
Grahm: Well, just, they didn’t go at it right, I don’t think. They, they went and pulled a strike too quick, shuttin’ the mill down, didn’t have enough money to last two weeks in it. Didn’t have no money in the treasury, there. And they just...

Stoney: What did you do during the strike?
Grahm: come here and farm. [inaudible words]. I’d, I’d bought a car from the president of the Mill for the mill, Mr. Jim [Stillward]. I was payin’ him, he’d take so much out of my time every check every month. And he’d just say, “don’t worry ‘bout it, yet, long as the strike, you just go ahead and drive the car,” he won’t charge me nothing. Now, Mr. Jones was a good man, but he was a Republican. He treat me nice. [They laugh.] But he, but he was close.

pg. 41-42
Stoney: Yeah. Now, what, since very few black people could work in the, were allowed to work in the mills at the time, uh, and there were almost, ne...there were almost never any wo...black women in the mills, I believe, what did they do? How did they work?
Grahm: Most women, black women, [inaudible words] what do you call 'em?

Woman: Maids.
Grahm: Maid. Well, my wife was a maid. She worked for the superintendent...

pg. 44-45
Stoney: Were you the first people, first person in your family to work in the cotton mill?
Grahm: No, Jake.

Woman: Jake, his brother...
Grahm: Jake was first.

Woman:...worked before he did.
Grahm: He was older than I was. Jake was the first one worked in the mill. [He bear the ways.] He took [Green Ham's] job, Green...how did Green die? Up, good 201. Jake died [in the mill], he died.
how you got into textiles.

BILL WOODHAM: Yeah. Tell me when to start.

QUESTION: Whenever you’re ready.

BW: I’m Bill Woodham. I’m 78 years old. I was 78 back in February, this year. And I got my start in textiles when I was born. My mother and daddy was in the textile business when I was born. As I grew up, I went to school ... I went to work in the mills. I want to work in the mills August, I believe it was, of 1926. I become 14 and a half years old, I went to work in a mill. I been in the mills ever since with the exception of two years ... a little over two years, I was in the service, in the Navy during World War II. The rest of the time I spent in a textile plant.

QUESTION: What have you done?

BW: I started working in the weave room. My father was a weaver and I had two sisters older than I already weaving. Actually I went to work in the weave room with them. Back in
Interviewee: Bill Woodham, Calloway Mills, Lagrange

50-14—50-17

BW: I’m Bill Woodham. I’m 78 years old. I was 78 back in February, this year. And I got my start in textiles when I was born. My mother and daddy was in the textile business when I was born. As I grew up, I went to school…I went to work in the mills. I went to work in the mills August, I believe it was, of 1926. I become 14 and a half years old, I went to work in a mill. I been in the mills ever since with the exception of two years… a little over two years, I was in the service, in the Navy during World War II. The rest of the time I spent in a textile plant.

Question: What have you done?
BW: I started working in the weave room. My father was a weaver and I had two sisters older than I already weaving. Actually I went to work in the weave room with them. Back in those days, families worked in all one department. They don’t do it now for business reasons. In case somebody’s sick in the family, or death in the family, they all have to shut a department down. They try to scatter them out throughout the plants. So I went to work in the weave room. It was various cleaning jobs and supporting jobs. I worked about six months, I guess, or a year, six month or nine months before I started learning to weave. (Inaudible) looms and I wove, I guess 15 years before I started fixing looms.

Question: Could you go back and tell us how long you worked, when you got up and what you made?
BW: Uh, back then, uh, 1926, ‘27, when the NRA come into affect, we worked from six o’clock in the morning until 12 in the day time. I had an hour off for lunch. Had mill whistles back then. Blew a meal whistle for lunchtime and had a whistle they blew as a notice, 15 minute notice, give you time to get to the mill. We all had to walk from home to mills, so we worked…go back in and work at one, work until five and if business was good, we worked until six when the night shift come in at six. Usually night shift worked from six to six, 12 hours. Uh, there wasn’t anything such as overtime back in those days. Work as many hours as you wanted to or could. There was no overtime figured in it. Uh, one of the thing that’s hard for people to understand nowadays is we got paid in cash back in those days and put our money in little envelopes, dollar bills, two dollar bills, or five dollar bills and the change in silver, even pennies. It was figured down to the penny. It was written on the front of the envelope, how much money you had in the envelope. At quitting time Saturday morning or whenever the last shift finished, we’d line up and we’d have little yellow slips of paper. We’d walk up and claim our pay slip, pay envelope. I remember the first envelope was seven dollars and a half. My mother let me take it and go buy me a shotgun. I walked all the way to town which was about two miles, bought that shotgun, brought it home on my shoulders, two miles back. I was only fourteen and a half years old. I felt like I was a grown person with that gun on my shoulder. Yeah, mills run along like that until President Roosevelt was elected and he brought the NRA in effect, the eight hour shifts. Uh, that changed everything in the textile industry. Like I say, it was a gradual improvement, a change, just pretty often, you know, in the way of running the mills. Management just had to figure out some way or another to keep us on jobs and keep us busy where they could make money because we had to have a guaranteed wage. I think it was 25 cents and hour when it first came into affect. Of course, back in those days, a quarter was a big piece of money. Management had to keep us busy and make us earn it, guaranteed wage, or try to make us earn
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Question: How did the management change to make you earn that money?
BW: Uh, they would try to keep us busy doing something or another. If we caught up on a job, they'd try to find us something else to do. Uh, like if, uh, when I first started, I was in just a supporting group, you know. I'd pick up quills and yarn off the floor and this, that and the other. Uh, as I learned to do other jobs, I'd catch that job up and they'd put me around helping the others that wasn't caught up. Person having trouble with a job, hat's where they started improving work schedules for us.

Question: Now, I've heard people talk about stretch out. Could you talk about the use of the term and then explain it.
BW: Yeah, they...they...used the term stretchout is when they give us more work load. Talking about a weave room, which I was in, may be running ten looms and you be getting pretty good and making pretty good money on ten looms, they'd give you two extra looms, no extra pay. That caused the stretchout system. Now I go into a plant and one person running a whole acre of looms just about it, but they've improved so it's possible to do that.

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Question: And I believe you had ball games, ball teams here...
BW: Yes, sir. The mill company had teams, you know. Each mill had their own team. Back in the 1920s, we had, uh, baseball teams here. They were second only to the Atlanta Crackers. That was before the Atlanta Braves, you know. But the Atlanta Crackers was the professional team in Atlanta. We had teams here that were second only to those Atlanta Crackers. Sometimes they would bring the Crackers down here for an exhibition game and our team would play them. Sometime they would beat them. Naturally the Saturday afternoon ball game was the main affair of the week. That's when everybody would come out, meet the neighbors, discuss the news, you know, while they watched the ball games. And all root for their home team. We had, uh, each mil company had their own hecklers. Some of them had two or three hecklers, but, uh, that was the fun part of the game, hearing the hecklers ragging the players. I well remember some of the old gentlemen. They were old gentlemen, you know, standing there and heckle the opposing players, visiting players. And we'd have more fun hearing those hecklers rag the baseball players. But that was the main event of the week during the summer months, having a baseball game. Some of our baseball players went from these teams on up to the major leagues, a few of them, you know. They were good players. They went to major leagues. They made good players. They had a good band of baseball going here.

Question: Now, somebody over in Columbus told me that, uh, he worked...he played baseball and so, even though he ws on a shift, some body else had to do most of the work. Is that...is there anything to that or was that just bragging?
BW: Oh, yeah that was...that was true. Uh, each...each mill wanted to have a winning team, you know.
President of the United States
Mr. F. D. Roosevelt

Dear Sir:

We the people of Charlotte, N. C. and the United States of which are a part of the Constitution are supposed to be a part of the Constitution of the United States by rights of the Constitution as appeal to you to take some steps into this Strike Situation.

I am sure you can use your influence in stopping those Governors of the States from moving into this situation. As you know they are elected to serve the people of both classes alike, instead of making the poor class their servants and their foot stoop. I am not a textile operator, but am in the position to know how the textile people live with their small salaries and hard work. They are so exhausted at the noon hour they seek the bed for rest instead of lunch so as to be able to make their afternoon hours. They are so nervous and exhausted when they come out at 5:15 o'clock in the afternoon that the bed is the first place before bathing and cleaning up for dinner.

I actually know the preceding to be the truth, because I am situated in a textile community and I am in the grocery business trying to serve them to the best of my ability. I know they cannot navigate under the present conditions. They cannot have substantial food and pay for it and have the other necessities of life. Such as clothes and shoes and materials for the home. Then because they ask for lower work and better conditions they are malsted and abused by the government and capitalist as though they have no voice in their own behalf.

We appeal to you, Mr. President as a god loving and god fearing man to for god's sake and the country's sake and for the sake of the poor people of our country to use your influence to the greatest extent to bring about better conditions.

Very truly yours,

Thank you—A loyal citizen

Mrs. May Hurley—widow

Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library
September 14, 1934
Charlotte, N.C.

President of the United States
Mr. F. D. Roosevelt

Dear Sir:

We the people of Charlotte, N. C. and the United States of which are a part of the Constitution are supposed to be a part of the Constitution of the United States by rights of the Constitution do appeal to you to take some steps into this strike Situation.

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I actually know the preceding to be the truth, because I am situated in a textile community and I am in the grocery business trying to serve them to the best of my ability. I know they cannot navigate under the present conditions. They cannot have substantial food and pay for it and have the other necessities of life. Such as clothes and shoes and materials for the home. Then because they ask for less work and better conditions they are molested and abused by the government and capitalist as though they have no voice in their own behalf.

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Very truly yours,

Thank you—A loyal citizen

Mrs. May Hurley—widow
Respectfully referred for acknowledgment and consideration

Lena McKinney

197 Simpson Street
Concord, North Carolina
September 13, 1934

Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt
President of U.S.
Hyde Park, New York

Hon. Sir:

It is to you that we now appeal our last vestige of hope lies in our whole hearted confidence in your impartial leadership. The Textile Strike was inevitable since all attempts to bargain collectively and make agreements with our employers have failed. All code provisions have been violated, particularly section seven A. Overseers of plant No. 6 of the Cannon Chain with an arrogance almost unaccountable walked through our praying pickets armed with guns, underneath the American flag, which was held aloft by two of our men without removing their hats, in respect to the Stars and Stripes of Old Glory. The course pursued by our Governor in calling out troops to what was reputed to be a disorderly section has met with wholesale disapproval as there has only been two fist fights in this strike zone. Is it fair that we should see our children half naked and our hearts torn out by their anguished cries for milk and food, that our mothers should be insulted and beaten on the picket line by hired thugs? The workers were in destitute circumstances before the strike, and the County Welfare Officers have not even investigated our appeals for relief and out jobs are threatened if we do not return to work.

Shall the sons and daughters of these old negroes who so nobly defended our cause and who whipped Cummins at King Mills be forced through starvation to return to the jute mills in humble submission, or shall we resort to the lost but not least measure. Is present there is an alternative - fight or starve.

Your intervention can avert this great catastrophe. It is in desperation that I appeal to you to stop this whole sale transgression on the rights of labor at the hands of greedy profit snatching exploiters of labor.

Sincerely yours,

Lena L. Winderowe

Special Collections Department, Georgia State University Library
Hon. Franklin Roosevelt  
President of U.S.  
Hyde Park, New York  

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Palmer L. Widenhowe (?)
Photographs relating to the General Textile Mill Strike of 1934
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Shall Georgians be denied the right to work?

Lessons in the History of American Labor
Archives, Library and Information Center, Georgia Institute of Technology
Newspaper Headlines about the General Textile Mill Strike of 1934