A Snapshot of Life in a Mill

Beginning around 1880, many people began to move to cotton mills throughout the South for many reasons. First of all, several generations of families were stuck in a cycle of poverty because many Southerners were trapped in an impoverished system of sharecropping. Many moved to mills to look for a better life than on the farm. Unfortunately, millwork did not allow for the economic freedom some had hoped for.

There were economic reasons for becoming a mill worker. The South was caught in a mono-crop system of cotton; cotton is harsh on the land and will not produce as much after many seasons. Furthermore, the price of cotton began to fall after 1870 due to more foreign product entering the market. In the 1920’s, the South had another devastating blow: bowl weevil. Bowl weevil is a bug that migrates in a swarm and eats crops, particularly cotton. Lastly, the stock market crash of 1929 and the depression that followed finished off the poor farmer. When workers moved off the farm to the mills, often the entire family would follow; not just the nuclear family but the extended family as well. Quite quickly, the piedmont region of the South was covered in textile mills.

The spring of new factories across the South were the product of the new South boosters. People like Henry Grady traveled the nation in the hopes of bringing Northern capital down to the South. Many Northerners invested in textile mills in the south and there was a growth of mill between 1880 to 1930. A popular political idea of the time was capital welfare and paternalism. This was the idea that business should look after the less fortunate and not the government. Historians such as W.J. Cash feel that the mills were the new plantations and the paternalism of the old South had carried over. Some historians believe that this idea is rooted in the Christian philosophy of Stewardship, but these ideals faded as the bottom line became more important and mill workers lives became tougher.

Working conditions in textile mills were not pleasant. They worked twelve-hour days. It was hot in the summer and cold in the winter. The machine put out a lot of noise and today that decibel level would be illegal. Before cotton is clean, it has an unpleasant odor. The mills were also very dirty. The millwork was also often dangerous; it would not be wise to get a limb stuck in a loom.

When working with unfinished cotton, negatively charged particles, lint, are in the air and are attracted to positively charged atoms. Therefore the lint sticks on machines, people, and clothes. Mill workers were also call lint-heads as negative slang because of the amount of lint in their hair at the end of a shift. Since the lint is in the air, also the worker breathes it in.

On top of all this, the workers had to deal with the stretch-out system. This is a management technique where the employee was given more work for the same salary is an effort to be more efficient. As an example, the mill may fire a worker and then not replace him or her in the factory but instead give a current employee the other’s job on top of his or her own. In essence it was one employee for two jobs, if not more. The Speed-up system was were the mills expected more product per machine. This pushed the
employees to work as fast as they could with no breaks. Many workers were becoming more dissatisfied with their bosses when the wages would be lowered or management would lay off workers in an apparently random fashion.

Life in a mill village was not easy either. Some historians have said the mill villages had a culture of misfortune. This meant that everyone in the village was going through the same hard times and it created a bond. The company owned Mill villages and the towns. In some towns, every store or service was managed and owned by the mill this included the grocery store, clothing store, funeral home, doctor, and the church. Because of this system, a mill worker may receive his or her pay and then immediately return that money back to the mill to pay off the debts in town. Back in the village, the Mill owned all the houses. If you were fired, you would also be evicted from your home. Many mills had conduct codes that did not allow for drinking, gambling, adultery, and all mill workers had to go to church on Sunday. Failure to meet with these codes were grounds for immediate dismissal.