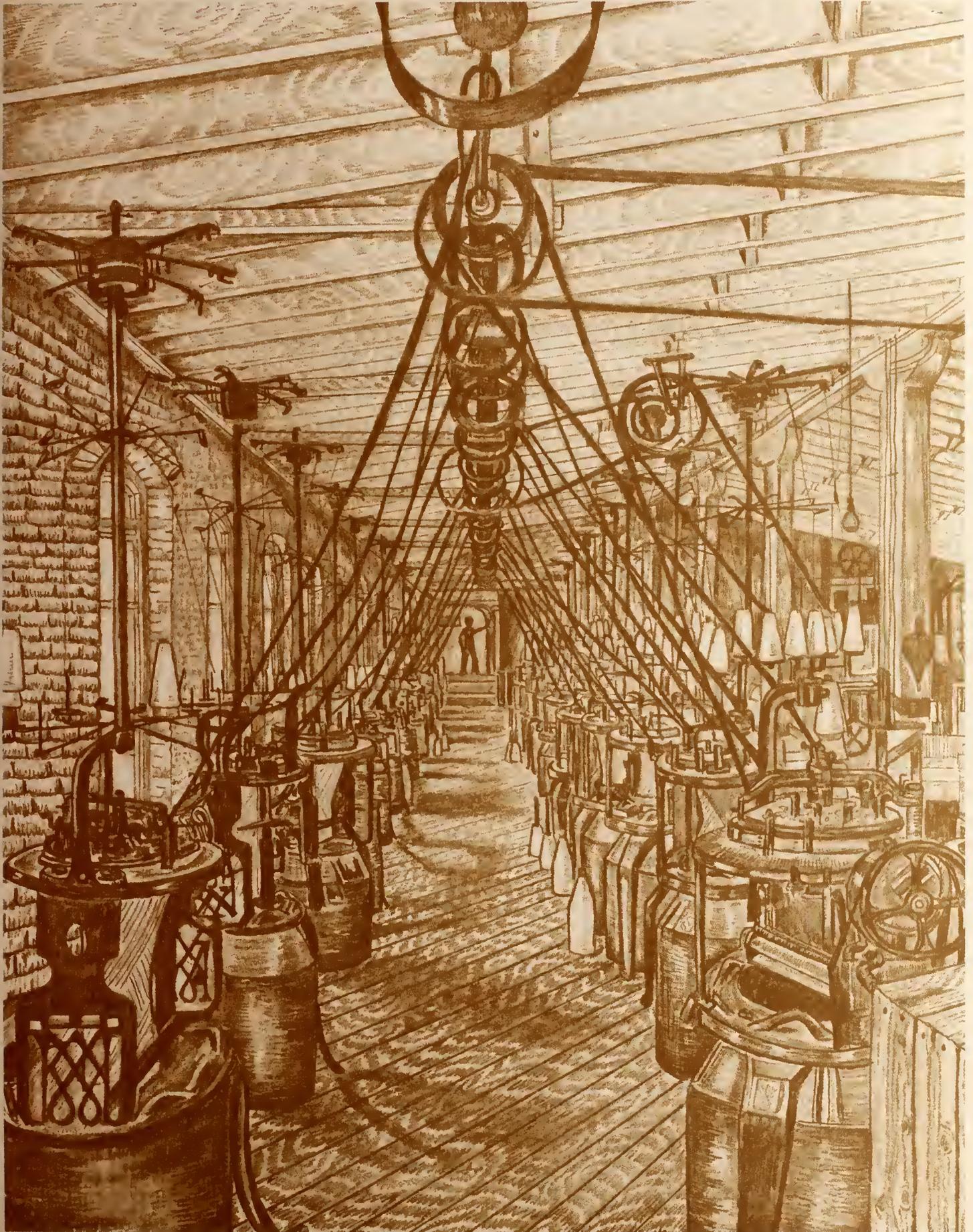


# Tar Heel Junior Historian

## Life and Labor in a Textile Mill Village



# A STITCH IN TIME

by Mac Whatley\*

In 1840 a whole family of mill workers slept in my living room. It was their house then, of course, with two small rooms, a fireplace, and a cramped loft under the gable. The Randolph Manufacturing Company, a corporation owned by over a dozen local stockholders in Franklinville, built the house and others like it in 1838, so that workers in its new factory would have a place to live.

A visitor in the 1840s found forty-two houses clustered on the hill above the factory on Deep River, as well as several stores and shops run by local craftsmen. The employees worked hard for their wages and the chance to live in those mill houses.

The Operatives . . . are respectable and intelligent girls. The visitor will be struck with their tidy dress, modest deportment and healthy appearance. Twelve hours per day is the average time of work the year round, except Saturdays, when it is only nine hours. Wages average from 12½ to 37½ cents per day, according to the age, skill and experience of the hand.

Another factory visitor wrote that the factory was a "Nice place, so many pretty girls attending the machinery. . . ." He added that they had "a bad practice of rubbing tobacco snuff on their teeth," however.

Franklinville and the neighboring "Island Ford" mill village soon grew together. When the community was incorporated by the state legislature in 1847, Franklinville became North Carolina's first official textile mill town. Five factory villages were built in Randolph County by 1850. Only Fayetteville had more. Almost 300 Randolph County residents worked in a factory then, while about 2,000 people did so in the whole state.

The expansion of the textile industry over the next 100 years can be seen by comparing those 1850 workers with mill workers in 1980. There were over 1,300 textile mills in North Carolina in 1980, and these employed over 100,000 people. In Randolph County alone over 10,000 people worked in the textile or apparel industries.

Interestingly all those factories and workers were not grouped together in large urban areas. North Carolina's scattered rural population greatly influenced the pattern of industrial



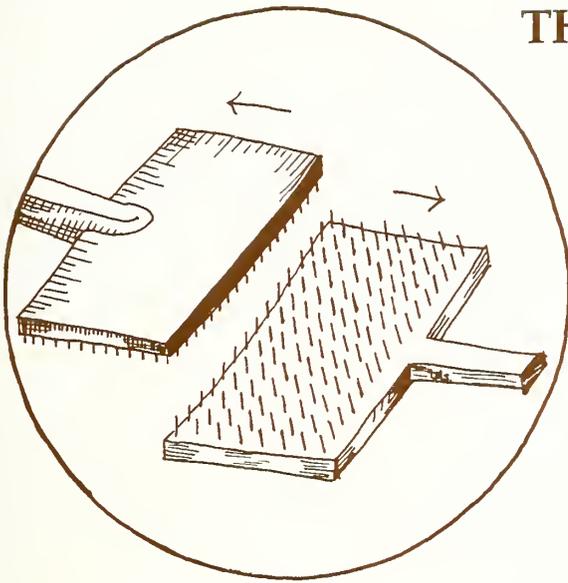
development. The state's textile factories grew up around small towns like Franklinville, with fewer than 2,500 residents. While work habits and technology radically changed from agricultural to industrial methods—from "private work" (working for family or friends) to "public work" (working for wages)—rural settlement patterns altered only slightly. The growth of textile mills in rural areas gave working North Carolinians an economic alternative to farming. It also allowed them to maintain a rural or small-town residence.

Mill villages may be slowly disappearing. Suburban housing developments and shopping malls creep into rural areas around our larger cities. Each new census finds the small towns of North Carolina losing population, as North Carolinians seek a greater range of educational, cultural, or recreational opportunities in urban areas. As the textile industry decreases in economic importance in the state, will textile mill villages also shrink into insignificance? Only ignorance will let them slip away unnoticed for their importance to our state's history.

How did industry change your community? How did factory work touch your family? We must come to value the many ways our lives have been shaped and enriched by this heritage of mill village life and work. It enfolds us all in the fabric of North Carolina history. 

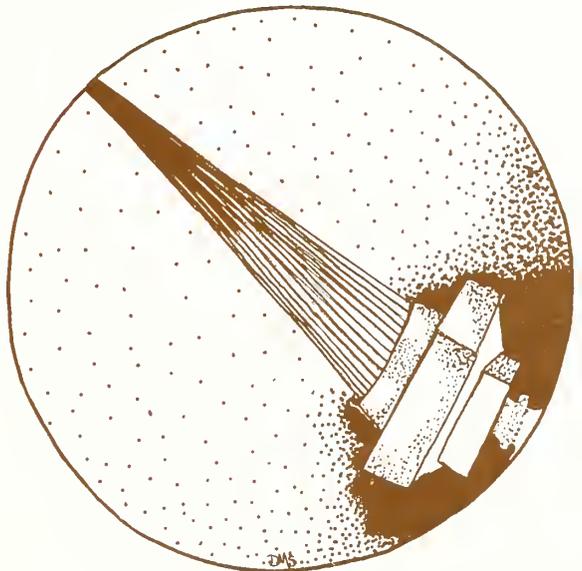
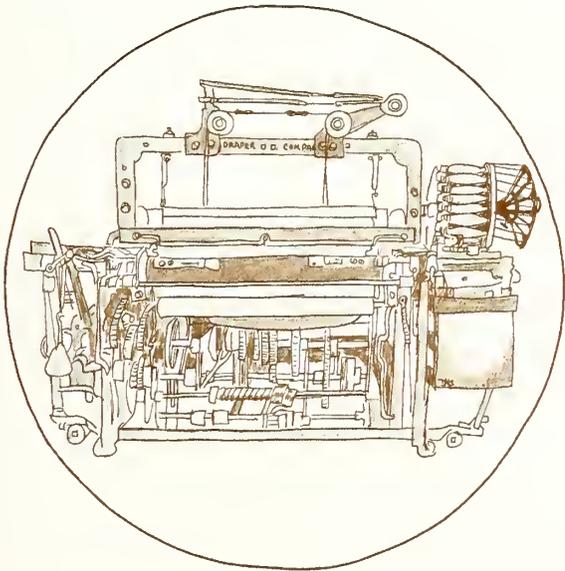
\*Mayor of Franklinville in Randolph County, North Carolina.

# THREADS



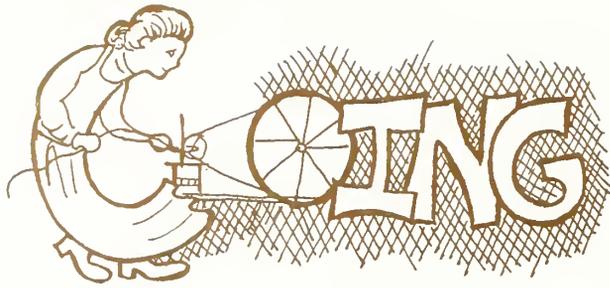
1. Spinning and cloth making began in the home and usually were done by women. The tools were simple: cotton and wool cards to clean and comb the fibers into even strands, a spinning wheel to twist the fibers into tightly packed yarn, and a loom to weave the yarn into cloth. It took a very long time to complete the process.

2. The early factory system in North Carolina began with mills like the Schenck-Warlick Cotton Mill established in Lincolnton, North Carolina, in 1814. By 1840 businessmen operated twenty-five mills in this state and employed 1,200 people (mainly women) to run their water-powered machinery.



3. Textile manufacturing boomed in North Carolina from 1880 to 1920. By 1900 the number of mills reached 186. They ran 1.3 million spindles and 29,689 looms. The labor force expanded too. Over 38,637 people earned their livings working in the state's textile mills. The large profits declined after World War I because of overproduction and increasing American and foreign competition.

4. Today many textile items are created not only with natural fibers like cotton or wool, but also with man-made plastic fibers like nylon and polyester. These modern fibers are formed by forcing chemicals through nozzles called spinnerets. Man-made fibers now account for more than two thirds of the fibers processed in this country. Computer-programmed machinery also has grown in importance in recent years.



### On the Road

**Research Triangle Park**, Interstate 40 near Raleigh. On a trip to the Raleigh-Durham area plan to visit a textile-related research facility in the park. Contact the executive vice president, Research Triangle Park, P.O. Box 12255, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina 27709 before your visit. Explain your interest in learning more about new developments in the field of textile research and industry.

**National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution**, 14th and Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20560. This museum includes many exhibits on industrial and scientific advances in America over the last two centuries. Furnaces, water- and electric-powered engines, and various machines provide insight into how completely the Industrial Revolution changed America.

### Things to Read

"You Can't Make a Living in a Cotton Mill: The Music of the Textile Mill Workers" and "Cotton Mill Colic," both in the *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, 25 (Winter, 1986). The article describes the type of music played and enjoyed by North Carolina mill workers during the 1930s. Photographs accompany the text. The teacher's supplement that accompanied the issue includes the lyrics of songs written by other mill workers during the Great Depression.

*Textiles, Teacher's Guide to Textiles in North Carolina*, prepared by Anne H. Kennedy for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of History Associates, 1984), grades 4-12, \$4.50. Written for teachers interested in presenting students with an overview of textile history. Topics range from home production of cloth to commercial textile manufacturing. The eighty-page booklet includes activities that teach spinning, carding, dyeing, weaving, and so on. Maps and illustrations are included. It is available from the North Carolina Museum Shop, 109 E. Jones Street, Raleigh, NC 27611.

*Inventions That Changed Our Lives: Cloth*, by Elizabeth Simpson Smith (New York: Walker and Company, 1985), index, grades 7-12, \$10.95. This fifty-eight page book discusses the developments in cloth making over the centuries and the history of the textile industry. It is illustrated with photographs depicting North Carolina companies and people.

*The Charlotte Music Story* (Raleigh: North Carolina Arts Council, Folklife Section, 1985), grades 7-adult, \$5.00.



The history of the mill workers who became America's earliest country and gospel music stars is traced in this thirty-page pamphlet, along with their recording and radio sessions in Charlotte. Excellent black-and-white photographs and suggested reading and listening lists enhance the text. To receive the pamphlet write the NC Folklife Section, 407 N. Person Street, Raleigh, NC 27604.

*Lewis Hine: Photographs of Child Labor in the New South*, edited by John R. Kemp (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), grades 4-adult, \$19.95. Lewis Hine traveled extensively through the South between 1908 and 1916 to photograph labor conditions in textile mills. A particular area of concern to Hine was the use and abuse of child labor. This 120-page book contains eighty photographs out of the hundreds that Hine snapped to record the plight of southern mill workers. The photographs and text provide excellent material to explore the living conditions and the heavy work loads of textile workers.

"America at Work: The Industrial Revolution," *Cobblestone* (September, 1981), grades 4-12, \$2.00. This issue of the "history magazine for young people" traces the overall development of industry and work conditions in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Excellent photographs and activities enhance the issue. To receive copies write to Cobblestone, 28 Main Street, Peterborough, New Hampshire 03458.

"Oral Histories: Life in the 1920s and 1930s," by Dorothy Lodge. This is a teacher's lesson plan developed for the Gaston County Oral History Project. To receive a copy write to Jerry Bostic, Social Studies Coordinator, Gaston County Schools.





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# FALL 1986

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The consulting editor for this issue was Brent D. Glass.

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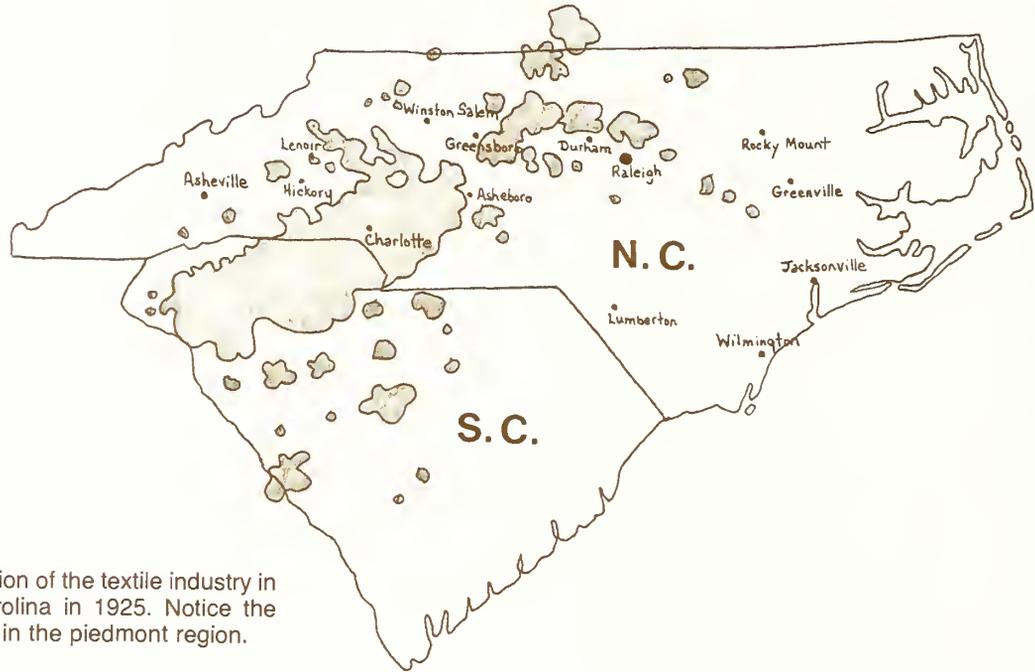
The North Carolina Museum of History Associates generously provided funds to print an additional 1,600 copies of this issue. These were sent to every eighth-grade teacher in the state.

**EDITORIAL POLICY**—Compositions to be submitted should be typewritten or legibly handwritten in double spaced form and should include the full name of the student and the school represented. When reference works (previously published material) are used, proper credit must be given to the original author. Include a bibliography listing each work used. List the author, title of work, facts about publication (place of publication, publisher, date, and edition), and pages used. If the exact words of the original author are used, quotation marks should be placed before and after the material used. When possible, black-and-white photographs to illustrate the article should accompany the written material. Space limitations and the need to adhere to the announced theme of each issue determine the final selection of articles for each issue. Topics are covered accurately but are not presented as exhaustive studies. All student compositions submitted for publication are required to meet highest literary standards, and are subject to editing and revision by the editorial staff.

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# ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN IN MILL VILLAGES

by Brent Glass\*



Map showing distribution of the textile industry in North and South Carolina in 1925. Notice the concentration of mills in the piedmont region.

By the mid-1920s there were over 200 mill villages in North Carolina. They ranged in size from tiny hamlets of twenty or thirty houses to large, sprawling communities like Kannapolis in Cabarrus County, whose population reached over 30,000 people. What did these mill villages look like? How did their design reflect the needs and values of the millowners and the workers?

The best definition of a mill village is a small town designed, built, and owned by a manufacturing company. During the mid-nineteenth century the need for mill villages arose because the textile industry depended upon water-powered machinery. A person starting a textile mill needed fast-moving water to run the new plant, and most of these sites fell along the major rivers in North Carolina: the French Broad, Catawba, Yadkin, Pee Dee, Haw, Deep, and Cape Fear rivers. The best locations also fell in undeveloped rural areas far away from towns or cities. Millowners had to provide adequate housing to attract workers to these areas. Whole families migrated to these villages. Men, women, and children found "public work" in the mill, tending the various machines used in the production of yarn and cloth. Throughout North Carolina, especially in the piedmont region, the entire population of a community could be dependent upon a single textile company, and

the villages that grew up around the mill were called "company towns."

By 1890 mill villages began to appear in greater numbers just outside small cities and towns like Gastonia, Charlotte, Concord, Greensboro, Burlington, and Durham. Improved forms of power sources—first the steam engine and later the electric generator—made it possible for textile mills to operate without being dependent upon rivers and streams for power. A statewide railroad system had also developed by the late-nineteenth century. Access to the railroads became more important for millowners than the availability of water power.

## MILL ARCHITECTURE

The architecture of the textile mill changed dramatically between the period before the Civil War and the first quarter of the twentieth century. The earliest mill buildings were usually two- or three-story brick structures, although several were placed in existing frame buildings being used as gristmills or sawmills. The roofs of these buildings were pitched or "gabled," and some had a clerestory [or clearstory—a raised section of a roof having windows or openings for ventilation on the sides] running along the ridge of the roof to

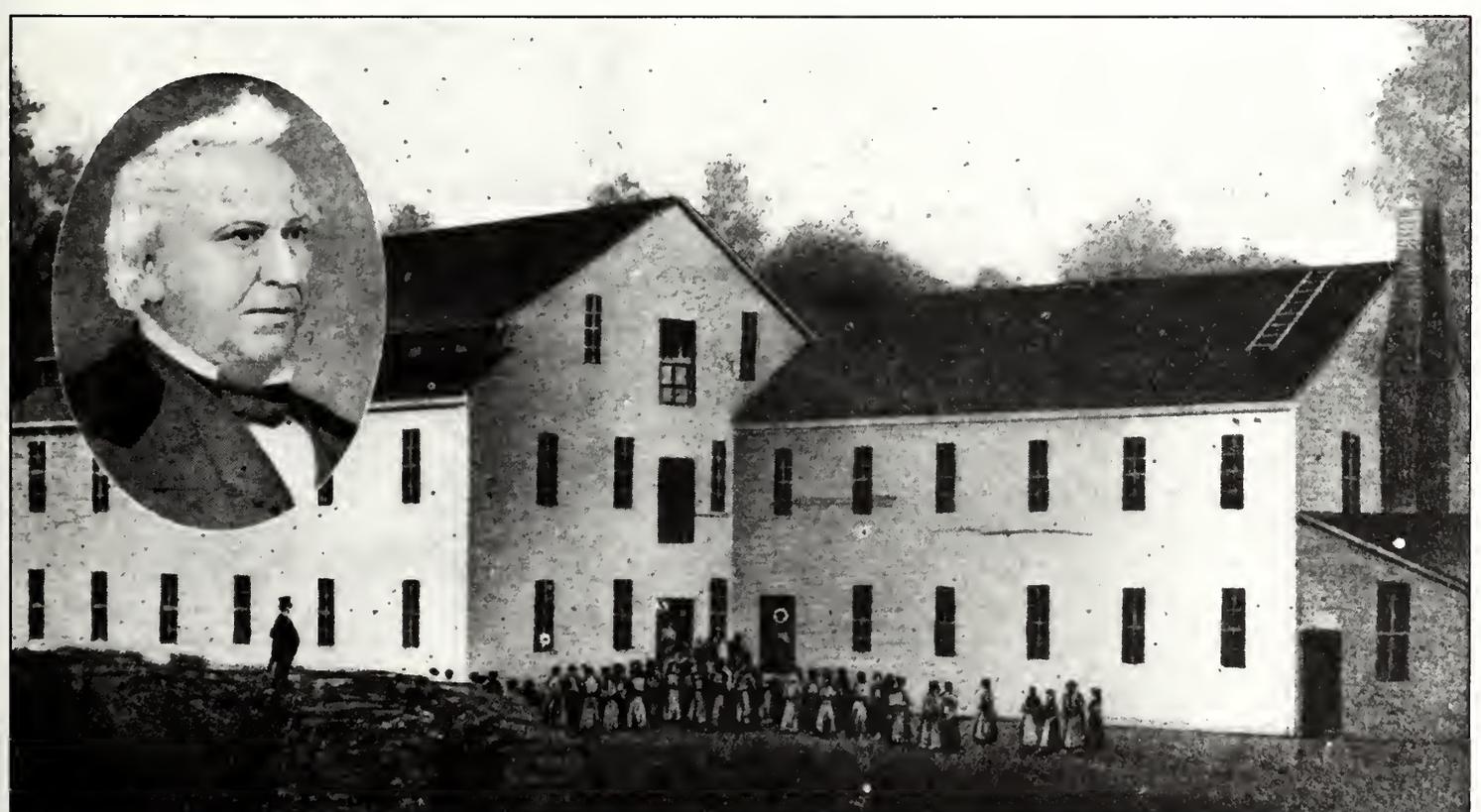
allow light into the factory. A stair tower might be located toward the middle of the mill. Some smaller buildings such as warehouses or a picker room for unpacking bales of cotton were located just outside the mill building.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, millowners and the companies that provided insurance for mills realized that new standards were needed to protect mill buildings from the risk of fire. Raw cotton was highly flammable, and small accidents often turned into major disasters. The new standards encouraged what became known as "slow-burn construction," with flatter roofs, heavy timber framing, brick walls, and separation of the main mill from those areas where a fire was most likely to occur and spread. By 1900 most new mills followed this type of construction with stair tower, picker room, engine and boiler room, and cotton warehouse all divided from the main mill by brick firewalls. The mill's exterior was decorated very modestly with brick or stucco at the cornice [where the roof meets the walls], around the windows, on the corners of the mill, or on the stair tower.

## HOUSING ARCHITECTURE

Houses in North Carolina's mill villages were different in appearance from those found in New England or Great Britain where workers lived in rowhouses, apartments, or boardinghouses. Millowners in North Carolina attempted to create a rural atmosphere by building single-family, detached houses on large lots with ample room for home gardens and animals. Many of the earliest villages probably looked a lot like Glencoe in Alamance County, where about forty houses built in the early 1880s still stand. These houses are one- and two-story wooden structures and many have hand-sawn timbers. They resemble small farmhouses and probably were built by local carpenters. Several houses have detached kitchens behind the main dwelling. There is no indoor plumbing, and each pair of houses shares a well and outdoor bathroom privy [outhouse].

By the end of the nineteenth century the design of mill houses became standardized. The author of a textbook for textile engineers,



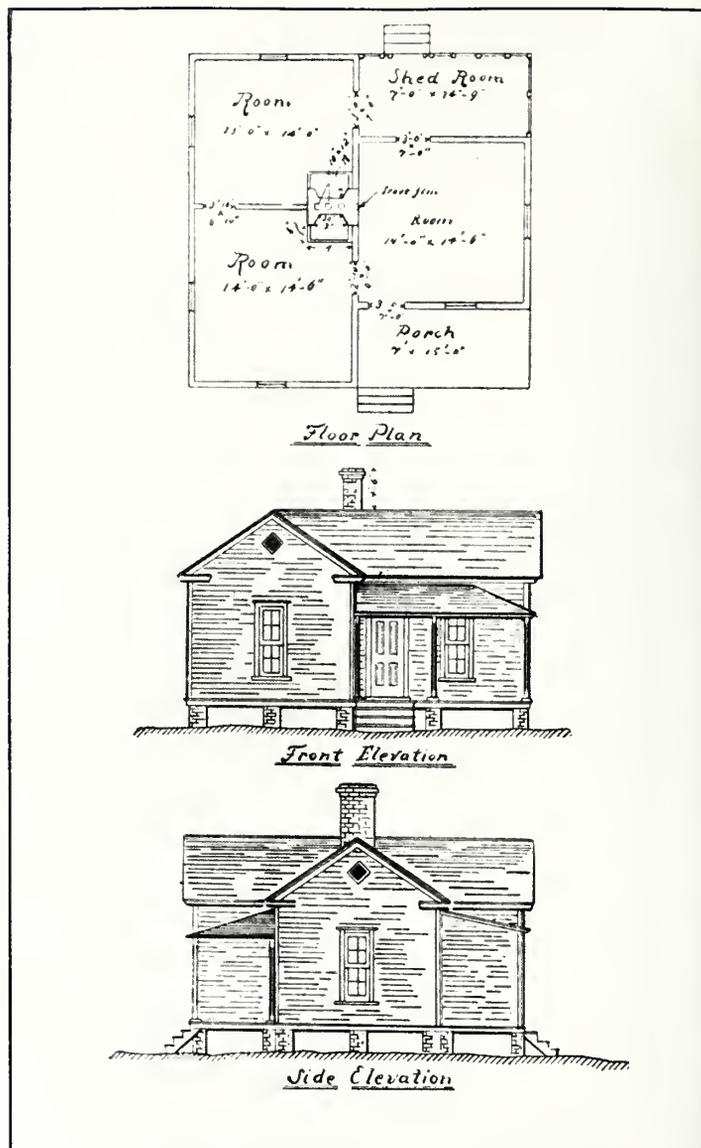
Alamance Mill, originally built in 1837 on Alamance River, manufactured the first colored cotton fabric in the South. Edwin M. Holt founded the mill. The mill burned and was rebuilt in 1871.

Daniel A. Tompkins, included several examples of three-, four-, and five-room, one-story mill houses that could be built for \$300.00 to \$450.00 each. Tompkins reminded his readers that mill workers were "a rural people" and did not require closets or indoor plumbing. Millowners usually followed Tompkins's recommendations, and the design of mill housing changed little over the next thirty years. In addition to housing for workers, a millowner often built a residence for himself and his family in the village, where he spent much of his time.

## VILLAGE DESIGN

The location of a mill village often dictated the design of streets and the arrangement of houses. Since the early villages of the mid-nineteenth century stood on hills overlooking a river, the streets tended to follow an irregular pattern along the side of the hill. Bynum, a village along the Haw River in Chatham County, is laid out almost like a "figure 8." At Glencoe in Alamance County, two residential streets slope down toward the Haw River where they intersect with a main street. At these intersections stand the company office and store, several warehouses, a water tank, and the Glencoe Cotton Mill.

Mill villages built near urban centers and small towns followed a more uniform, grid-like street pattern. House lots were smaller, although there was still room for home gardening and even some farm animals. In the urban settings the millowner rarely lived in or



A three-room mill house, ca. 1898, cost \$325.00 to build.

This Charlotte mill house followed the three-room floor plan shown above. Notice the absence of trees, grass, or landscaping.





The mill town Kannapolis under construction, ca. 1905. Cannon Mills began here. Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, UNC Library at Chapel Hill.

near the mill village. Despite these differences the mill villages built in the early-twentieth century resembled their nineteenth-century country cousins in many ways. The mill building, of course, continued to occupy a central place in the village. The mill's smokestack and stair tower could be seen from great distances. Another similarity and often a source of complaint by mill workers was the lack of shade trees in most villages, especially those built in growing urban areas where the land had been cleared of trees. A handful of the more prosperous companies acknowledged this problem. They employed professional landscape architects to design attractive arrangements of plantings at the entrance to the village and along major streets.

In addition to building the mill, warehouses, and housing for workers, the mill-owners usually provided facilities like a company store, an area for recreation, at least one church, and even a school building as part of the mill village. In the villages located along rivers in rural areas, these additions were necessities. With the construction of textile mill villages in more urban settings after 1890, mill companies continued the practice of providing these basic services for the workers. The

mill village was more than a place for manufacturing. It was a total industrial community.

Almost from the beginning the mill village has been a subject of some controversy. Mill-owners erected mill villages and developed other strategies to win greater loyalty to the mill company and to keep workers from becoming discontented. Management provided various services and expected the loyalty, discipline, and obedience of the workers in return. Many millowners not only built churches and schools in their villages, but they also hired the ministers and teachers. This put the owners in a position to influence the content of what mill workers and their children heard in the pulpits or learned in the classrooms. Welfare workers offered important services, but they also could detect disloyal or disruptive elements in the village and report problems back to supervisors and millowners. Participation by workers in the village's recreational programs and athletic teams often depended upon good behavior and work. Even the architecture of the village, according to some critics, reinforced the system of paternalism. Street plans, especially in the urban areas, appeared uniform and unimaginative. Most houses were painted white without any



Mill village in Roxboro, Person County, early 1930s. This town reflects an urban mill village design with its uniform streets and houses.

decoration and without much variety in form or plan. In some villages the millowners placed housing for supervisors at strategic locations so that they could identify any social problems or union-organizing activities.

The idea of controlling mill workers with housing and special programs backfired on the company owners, however. The villages encouraged the growth of close-knit neighborhoods and communities described by workers and management as a "family." Mill companies discovered they could not handle mill village culture as they had planned. Workers throughout the piedmont region of North Carolina developed networks of information and family when they moved from village to village in search of jobs. Workers came to regard the piedmont as "one long mill village." In times of economic stress these close ties provided the foundation for widespread group action against management policies. These took the forms of protests and even strikes against the mill companies. In North Carolina textile industry strikes occurred in Haw River in 1900, Charlotte in 1919, and in Gastonia and Marion in 1929. A general strike that affected dozens of mills in the state began in September, 1934. "Flying squadrons" of workers traveled from one village to another to encourage all workers to support the strike.

When millowners realized that mill village culture could threaten their authority and that workers were not responding to management demands for loyalty, they reacted quickly. Millowners began to see the villages as serious

obstacles to their control of workers. Several managers observed that workers were less likely to organize together in unions or strikes if they lived away from the mill on farms or in towns. When the Great Depression hit the state in the 1930s, millowners also found the villages too expensive to maintain. The New Deal's minimum-wage legislation passed in 1938 would not allow companies to pay their employees lower wages simply because the company provided low-rent housing. The companies still had to pay minimum-wage rates while they absorbed heavy expenses in operating the villages. The economic hardships of the 1930s, the strikes of 1929 and 1934, and the new federal wage policies convinced most companies to sell their mill villages.

Despite these serious problems, many people have praised the mill village as a decent place to live. After all, the mill village offered steady work for rural people who could not survive on the farm. Workers found housing that was affordable and often of better quality than the homes they left on the farm. The village itself was usually small, self-contained, and invited a sense of neighborhood and community among the residents. People came to know and depend on each other.

As for the visual appearance of the village, observers have found many of the villages to be of great historic and architectural merit. Several villages in North Carolina such as Glencoe in Alamance County and the Pearl mill village in Durham have been listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

By the mid-1930s the mill villages of North Carolina began to pass into history. Many workers by this time owned automobiles and chose to leave the village, buy small pieces of land for farming, and commute to work at the mill. During the Great Depression, which began in 1929, many millowners decided they could no longer afford to maintain the housing or other facilities in the mill village. They adopted a policy of selling the houses to their employees or to other private interests who held the houses for rental purposes. As the villages lost their identity, many cities expanded their boundaries and annexed the villages. As a result the city increased its tax base while the former mill villages received services like water, sewer lines, fire and police protection, and sanitation [garbage disposal]. Many towns in North Carolina—Shelby, Gastonia, north and west Charlotte, Concord, north Greensboro, Burlington, east Durham, Roanoke Rapids—contain remnants of former mill villages that have been incorporated within the town boundaries over the past fifty years.

Housing in most mill villages is now completely in private hands. Much of it is in surprisingly good condition. This has helped save

some villages. One example of rehabilitation occurred in Bynum in the late 1970s. The Chatham County Housing Authority purchased the entire village from the J. M. Odell Manufacturing Company, repaired the forty-four houses, installed indoor plumbing, paved the streets, and sold the houses back to the residents at very reasonable prices.

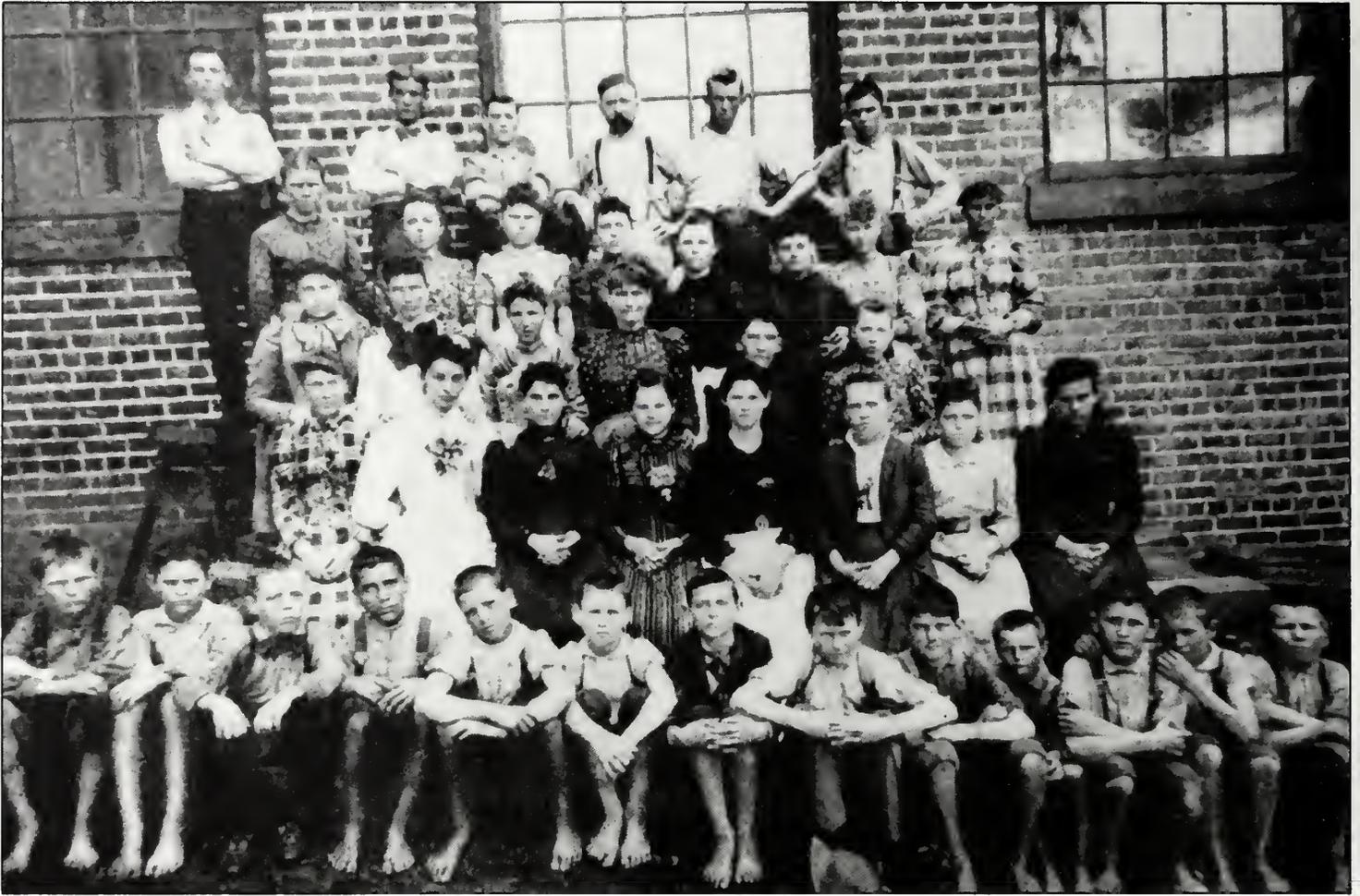
As the textile industry continues to decline in importance in North Carolina, the number of abandoned mill buildings in the rural and urban areas increases. In some instances there have been imaginative “adaptive reuse” projects turning mill buildings into apartments, offices, and stores. Most mills, however, sit vacant or underused. Many are being demolished. The Orange Factory village in Durham County will be destroyed to make way for a dam and reservoir on Little River. At Glencoe a few families continue to occupy homes while the remainder of the houses and other buildings crumble around them. The woods that surround the village are slowly taking over, returning the mill hill to its original condition before the age of waterwheels, spindles, and looms. 



Great Falls Mill, Rockingham, Richmond County. This mill was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places but burned to the ground.

# PATERNALISM: THE CONTROL OF A MILL VILLAGE

by Paul Escott\*



Unidentified cotton-mill workers, 1899.

The textile industry brought many changes to North Carolina. Factories and mill towns sprang up in a rural state, and thousands of Tar Heel workers left farms for work in cotton mills. There they were introduced to manufacturing, which has become more important to North Carolina than to any other state.

Many historians and writers have claimed that the textile industry continued some old ways as well. W. J. Cash, a Charlotte newspaperman, published a widely read book called *The Mind of the South* in 1941. It compared the mill village to the plantation. Cash declared that the key institution of the old, slaveholding South—the plantation—“had literally been brought bodily over” into the New South in the form of the mill village.

The pre-Civil War planter owned the slaves' cabins and gave the slaves whatever food, clothing, medicine, or preaching they received. In the same way, Cash pointed out, the millowner typically owned the homes of his workers and the company store where they got their food and clothing. The millowner



Kate Russell, weaver, 1872, Franklinville.



These women were employed in the reeling room of a cotton mill near Gastonia in 1939.

paid a company doctor who was the only doctor most workers ever saw. And many millowners either paid the minister's salary or gave the mill village church much of the money it needed to survive.

Cash carried his comparison one step further—the cotton-mill workers were like slaves. They were “stripped” of their traditional freedom as independent farmers and “placed in every department of life under the control” of the millowner. The key instrument of this control was *paternalism*, an apparently kind or fatherly authority that had been very popular with slaveholders. The millowner supposedly knew what was best for his workers, so he provided for them and controlled them.

Some parts of Cash's picture were true—millowners usually owned the entire mill village and had tremendous power there. Some millowners used that power in paternalistic ways, particularly between 1900 and 1940. But Cash misled thousands of readers about the textile workers. They were never quiet, obedi-

ent slaves. Instead they were hard-working people who sought to be independent and who survived the best they could, often in difficult times. Textile workers were never as happy with paternalism's friendly but rigid control as Cash believed.

Times were hard for farmers in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. “Poor men with large families cannot make their living by farming,” noted one millowner, “so they go to factories.” It was not easy to make a living in the mills either, even though most families had a vegetable garden in addition to store-bought food. Wages were so low that men, women, and small children all had to work. The work was long too—ten to twelve hours a day, six or six-and-a-half days a week.

Financially many families did better in the mills than they had on the farm. Many appreciated the opportunities for friendship and the escape from rural loneliness that they found in a mill village. But mill workers were not content. When they felt safe in doing so, they complained about long hours and low wages, high prices at the company store, poor housing, and especially the lack of education for their children. Sometimes they went on strike.

Before 1900 millowners concentrated on building up a new industry. They had firm work rules, but they did not rely on paternalism to control their workers' lives. Most of



A. C. Brower, overseer of the Randolph Mills slashing room, Franklinville, 1921-1923.

them probably agreed with a Raleigh millowner who said that workers "resent promptly whatever they consider interference with their affairs, whether it is meant for their good or not." This millowner believed that "the less employees are interfered with, the more content they are."

Paternalism became much more visible after 1900, however. The economy improved, and some mill families left the factories and went back to farming. Those who stayed in textiles began moving from one company to another seeking better wages or conditions. The owners, desiring more control over their roving labor force, began to present themselves as the friends of working people. They hoped that personal attention to workers might lead to more satisfied employees. And small acts of kindness made it easier for the millowner to supervise a worker's private life or tell him when to get to bed.

Before 1920 owners of some large mills began to invest money in recreational buildings, health programs, and other examples of "welfare capitalism." Though these investments were expensive, owners hoped they would result in happier, better workers. Relatively few companies could afford these programs, and they did not last. But one important development was the rise of company baseball and softball teams on which many workers loved to play and compete.

The 1920s brought a different atmosphere, one of anxiety, worry, and pressure. During World War I the world wanted more cloth and uniforms, but when the war ended the mills were making too many textiles. That meant lower prices, shrinking profits, and fierce competition between companies. The millowners, anxious to receive more work for less money, hired experts to conduct "time studies" that would reveal the most efficient way to do a job. Then owners asked the workers to meet the new standards of efficiency. To cut costs, millowners also tried to get by with fewer employees. Textile workers called these steps the "speed up" and the "stretch out," because they felt the pressure of working faster and watching more machines.

These tensions caused several strikes in the 1920s and many more in the 1930s, when the Great Depression brought hard times for almost everyone. A few strikes were successful, but most were not. Although the New Deal sponsored by the federal government encouraged unions and higher wages, southern companies won most of the battles in the 1930s and 1940s. As a result thousands of textile workers concluded that unions were a bad bet, and paternalism continued to be important in the textile industry.

Since World War II modern economic forces have created new conditions in the textile industry and steadily undermined



Pilot Mills softball team, 1938, Raleigh city champions.



Loray Mill, Gastonia, site of a bloody strike in 1929. Notice the size of this mill compared to early mill factories.



Wilson Cotton Mill, Wilson County.

paternalism. Faced with stiff, worldwide competition, small companies have had to merge in order to have enough money to buy expensive new machinery. To raise more money and cut long-term costs, most mills sold off their company housing. Owners who once played a stern but "fatherly" role as head of the mill family have been replaced by modern investors and managers. These new managers often remain impersonal, distant figures to the men and women running the mill's machines.

An era of textile history has ended, and a new and very different one has begun. In the future there will be many fewer textile workers. Those who remain will use complicated, often computerized machines and work in large companies. However labor-management relations may change, it seems likely that the age of paternalism is over. Textile owners no longer have small plants and personal knowledge of every employee, so it is harder for them to be paternalistic. And Tar Heel workers no longer have to stay with jobs they may dislike. They can change to a new job instead of acting as if they were happy. The mill village still exists, but it is rapidly fading away. The same can be said of paternalism, the old style of authority in Tar Heel textile mills.





Unidentified mill worker, Franklinville, ca. 1900.

## WOMEN IN MILL VILLAGES

by Mary Frederickson\*

In the late-nineteenth century a manufacturing boom hit North Carolina, and hundreds of cotton mills were built throughout the state. As new mills opened, many jobs became available for women and children who were the family members most easily spared from agricultural work. Soon thousands of women, both single and married, moved from farms into the newly built villages that surrounded the mills. As mill work became more common and farming increasingly difficult for North Carolinians, more men came to mill villages as

well, to join their families or to find jobs themselves. Nevertheless, in many mills the majority of the work force continued to be made up of women who had moved into mill villages with promises of steady work, cash wages, and hopes of being able to send their children to school.

Adjusting to life in mill villages was not easy. Work hours were long, and the jobs were difficult. Many villages lacked schools. Women reared on farms found it took time to get used to beginning work when a bell rang.

Running machinery indoors and working the night shift also seemed strange and unsettling. But gradually women made friends, enjoyed living closer to relatives, and joined together to open schools and churches.

Because women employees became important to cotton manufacturers, some mill-owners provided special benefits for women. Before 1900 women who lived in a mill village might receive permission to leave work a little early to prepare dinners for their families or to nurse babies left in the care of relatives. A few villages ran day nurseries for babies and toddlers, and others had family health clinics. Before 1918 children were expected to go to work in the mill after they finished the sixth or seventh grade. Some left school even earlier to help their mothers in the mill. Most women did not want their children to work in the mill, but they felt better when they could keep an eye on their own boys and girls.

Women labored very hard in cotton mills as spinners or weavers. They often left their

homes at 6:00 A.M. to begin the twelve-hour day shift. They left home at 6:00 P.M. if they worked on the night shift. Mill families in North Carolina in the early-twentieth century remained large, usually with six or seven children. A family often had three or four family members working in the mill at the same time. Single women employed in the mill usually lived with their families and contributed their wages to the family budget. Married women hired by the mill who had large families worked doubly hard. Most of these women depended on an older relative—an aunt, mother, or grandmother—for help with child care and housekeeping. Before the 1960s most North Carolina mill employees were white. White women in mill villages sometimes relied on black women who lived nearby to help with domestic chores like child care, cooking, and laundering in return for a small payment in cash.

For many North Carolina women, life in a mill village brought more pleasure than living



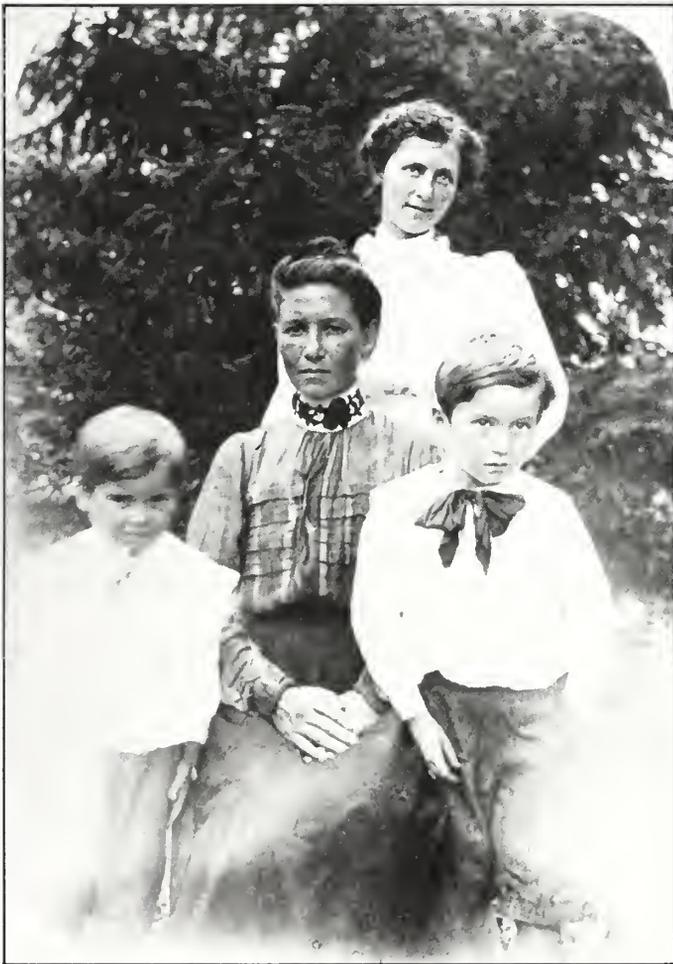
Women employees at the Wearwell Sheeting Mill in Draper (now Eden), Rockingham County, 1921.

in the country and farming. Some mill families settled into a village and stayed for two or three generations. Others left after a few weeks, moving on to another village where the wages might be slightly higher or the working or living conditions better. As North Carolina mill villages became established communities, women who did not work in the mill ran boardinghouses or worked as midwives and teachers. When older women retired from mill work they tended gardens, quilted, fished, visited, and worked with the church.

During World War I mill work became more fast-paced. Children were no longer hired as workers or allowed to assist their mothers as "helpers." Work demands by mill companies also increased. Those who could not keep up lost their jobs. In the 1920s and 1930s many North Carolina women and men

worked to improve conditions in mill villages throughout the state by joining textile unions or by striking to protest substandard wages and inadequate living conditions.

After World War II employment in North Carolina mills improved as wages increased and the eight-hour day replaced ten- or twelve-hour shifts. During the 1940s millowners began to sell mill houses to the workers. Women enjoyed becoming homeowners, but some were sad to see the villages disbanded. After 1965 both black and white women found employment in textile manufacturing throughout the South. Today, although the number of textile workers in North Carolina has declined and most of the mill villages are gone, women workers still make up the majority of the work force in mills across the state. 



Mill village women included single and married women workers and the wives and daughters of mill superintendents and owners. This family from Franklinville, ca. 1900, probably was related to the millowner's family.



Women held the majority of jobs in textile mills. They performed the tasks that required prolonged concentration and manual dexterity. Gastonia, 1939.



## "LIKE A FAMILY": LIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA MILL VILLAGES

by James Leloudis\*

Upper-mill workers, Franklinville, 1892. Mill workers developed a strong sense of family within the factories and mill villages spread across the piedmont region of North Carolina.

Mill hands made their homes in villages owned by the men who employed them. At the turn of the century 95 percent of southern textile families lived in factory housing. For these people, perhaps more than for any other industrial work force in America, the company town established the patterns of everyday life. But the mill village was more than a place to work and earn a living. It was also the setting in which men and women fell in love, married, reared their children, and retired in old age. Within the village mill hands created a new way of life by weaving together their rural heritage and the experiences of factory labor.

Millowners first constructed villages because they needed a place to house their workers. Individual families and groups of local investors built most early mills in the countryside. Run by waterwheels, small factories clung to the streams that flowed rapidly from the mountains toward the coast. In such

remote locations companies had little choice but to provide housing where none existed before. A typical village consisted of a superintendent's residence, a cluster of single-family dwellings, a frame church, a small school, and a company store. These facilities were essential to recruiting workers and carrying on the business of the mills, yet manufacturers also saw in them the means of exercising control over their employees. Investigators from the United States Bureau of Labor reported in 1910 that "all the affairs of the village and the conditions of living of all the people" seemed to be "regulated by the mill company. Practically speaking, the company owns everything and controls everything, and to a large extent controls everybody in the mill village."

Mill folk lived close to the bone. In the 1910s kerosene lamps lit a majority of their houses, and open fireplaces provided heat. Families

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drew their water from wells or hydrants shared with neighbors, and almost all households had outdoor toilets rather than indoor plumbing. Village houses were very small. The average southern mill family of seven lived in a four-room cottage that offered little privacy. Bessie Buchanan, who grew up with eight brothers and sisters, remembered what it was like. "The boys slept in one room, and the girls slept in another one. And Mother and Daddy had a room. We didn't have a living room or a den or nothing like that."

Bessie Buchanan's family also did not own any of the modern appliances that make life easier today. After working in the mill for ten or twelve hours, Bessie's mother and other village women came home to cook on wood stoves and to wash clothes in large iron kettles over open fires. Edna Hargett told how difficult it was to combine factory labor and household chores. "It was a job. I'd get up a[t] five o'clock in the mornings, because you had to be at work at six. I got up in the morning and I'd make up dough and have biscuits for my children. Then we'd come home and do a washing, and had to wash on a board outdoors and boil your clothes and make your own lye soap. It was just a day of drudgery, but with God's help I got it done."

Workers dealt with these hardships by clinging to the habits and customs that had helped them survive on the farm. As in the countryside, village life was based on family ties. Children of first-generation workers married newcomers, knitting individual households together in broad networks of sharing and concern. For many couples marriage evolved out of friendships formed while growing up in the village. Even after the passage of effective child labor laws in the 1910s, most children went to work in the mills by age fourteen. Inevitably they met their spouses on the job and courted there as well. Grover and Alice Hardin fell in love in the mill. "My wife worked in the spinning room," Grover recalled. "We met, and it must have been love at first sight because it wasn't long after we met that we married. She was a spinning-room person, and I would go, when I could, up to the spinning room, and we'd lay in the window and court a little bit. We decided then just to get married."

Like farmers, mill hands worked hard to grow much of their own food. A family's wages from the mill barely made ends meet, so a good garden often made the difference between a healthy diet and going hungry. Edna Hargett's father planted vegetables every



Wylie Cotton Mill and village, Chester, South Carolina, 1908. Note the privies and cows grazing in the backyards. Lewis Hine, Library of Congress.



Children took care of the family cows, pigs, and chickens. These children lived at the Wylie Cotton Mill village in Chester, South Carolina, 1908. Lewis Hine, University of Maryland at Baltimore.



Doffers and their superintendent at the Catawba Cotton Mill, Newton, North Carolina, ca. 1908. Doffers removed full bobbins of thread from the spinning frames. Lewis Hine, Library of Congress.

Franklinville school gym, Randolph County, ca. 1915. Millowners provided schools, playgrounds, and community activities to encourage workers to remain employed at their mills for many years.



spring but could not afford a mule to help break the land. He made do by putting a harness around himself and having his children "stand behind and guide the plow." Louise Jones's family also gardened, kept a milk cow, and raised "homemade meat." Her parents "had a big corn patch and a few chickens around the yard. We'd have maybe six or eight hens, and we'd let the hens set on the eggs and hatch chickens and have frying-size chickens, raise our own fryers."

Although each family claimed a small plot of land for its own use, villagers shared what they grew and "live[d] in common." In late summer and early fall they gathered for the familiar rituals of harvest and hog killing. Paul and Don Faucette remembered how it was done. "We'd kill our hogs this time, and a month later we'd kill yours. Well, you can give us some [meat], and we can give you some. They'd have women get together down at the church and have a quilting bee. They'd have a good crop of cabbage, [and] they'd get together and all make kraut." Villagers helped one another not with an expectation of being paid but with the assurance that their neighbors would help them in return. "They'd just visit around and work voluntarily," one man recalled. "They all done it and nobody owed nobody nothing."

Community values governed mill village life, but there was also room for individual accomplishment. Folk medicine formed an important part of the workers' culture. Until well into the twentieth century mill hands could not afford doctors' fees. In times of sickness they turned to their own healers and home remedies. In Bynum the local healer was

a woman named Ida Jane Smith. She delivered babies and nursed the sick. "Lord she was a good woman," Carrie Geringer remembered. "She knowed more about young'uns than any doctor. One of my daughters had the measles and pneumonia. The doctor checked her and said that she wouldn't live through the night. But me and Mrs. Ida Smith sat there all night and put on tar jackets with Vicks pneumonia salve. We just kept putting them on and putting them on and keeping her warm. And doggone if she didn't come through the night and live!"

If healers were the most respected women in the village, musicians held that place among men. String bands had always been a part of country gatherings, and their numbers multiplied in the mill villages where musicians lived closer together and had more opportunities to play. On Saturday nights village bands often performed for house dances and community celebrations. Harvey Ellington remembered that "you'd have a dance in somebody's house—they'd take the beds and all out, and then we'd just play." With the introduction of radio and inexpensive record players in the 1920s, Ellington and many other mill musicians became local celebrities. They performed in the studios of Charlotte's powerful radio station WBT and signed contracts with national recording companies like RCA and Columbia Records. These men were pioneers in transforming the sounds of the Carolina hills and mill villages into today's country music.

Viewed from the outside mill villages seemed to keep workers under their employers' watchful eyes and to deny them a voice in

their own affairs. In many ways that perception was accurate. But to say nothing more about village life would be to overlook an important part of the story. Even in muddy streets and cramped cottages textile workers managed to create their own world of pride and dignity. Hoyle McCorkle, a retired mill hand from Charlotte, perhaps best summed up what the mill village meant to the people who lived there. "I guess there were two hundred houses on this village, and I knew practically all of them from a kid up. It was kind of a cliché or something like that: You grew up here and you knew everybody. It had its bad points; we didn't make much money. I know my father didn't. But it was kind of a big family—it was a two-hundred-headed family—and we all hung together and survived." 

**SOURCES:**

Interviews with Bessie Buchanan, Edna Hargett, Grover and Alice Hardin, Louise Jones, Paul and Don Faucette, Carrie Gerringer, Harvey Ellington, and Hoyle McCorkle, Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Gaston County mill village children watch their parents dance in a community center, 1939.



Harvey Ellington playing with the Swingbillies at the WPTF radio station, Raleigh, ca. 1936. Courtesy of Harvey Ellington and Della Coulter, Folklife Section, North Carolina Arts Council.

# TOYS AND GAMES: GOOD TIMES IN A NORTH CAROLINA MILL VILLAGE

by Valerie Quinney\*



Unidentified mill village street and children, 1909. Note the hydrant that several families used for water. Lewis Hine, University of Maryland at Baltimore.

If you had no money to buy toys and not much time to play anyway, could you still have fun? Young people in North Carolina's mill villages early in our century found ways. Over thirty women and men discussed their lives in oral history interviews and talked especially about their childhood before World War I in Carrboro, North Carolina. Some of the things they did sounded like so much fun that it made me and my fellow researchers wonder if we had missed something.

From the ages of eight and nine years, young people worked part-time in the mill. Once they reached the age of twelve they worked full-time, and they all had chores at home. Time for play still could be squeezed into a few hours on Saturday and Sunday afternoons.

Mill houses had only three or four rooms with many family members and boarders

crowded together. The woods at the edge of the backyard, however, offered plenty of space to play and natural materials to make toys. Small children used huge gold and crimson oak leaves to fashion hats. They broke off broom straws (these looked like long tooth-picks) to use as pins to hold the leaves together and to fasten daisies on top. They gathered green moss and covered large rocks to make "upholstered" furniture. Corncobs, dressed in scraps of cloth, became dolls. Crates or boxes from the store were transformed into wagons that carried the corncob families to visit other families. Sometimes there was a wedding among the corncob families in the woods, sometimes a funeral. One of the children preached, and all cried real tears.

Reaching beyond their experiences in the mill village, the children also imagined the Indians who had lived there hundreds of years

before them. Not only did they pretend they were Indians, but they also searched for Indian artifacts. They always wondered if a treasure lay just beyond their fingers. One woman recalled a special, enchanted afternoon.

. . . . So one day we wandered off just a little farther from home. There was quite a crowd of us. And we just kept a-walking, and kept a-walking, and we came upon something that was buried in the ground. And we could tell from the way it . . . was sticking up—that it was a handle of something, or maybe a handle to a pitcher, or something. Just the way it was sticking up. And it was a kind of copper color. And I won't ever forget it! We was so thrilled we didn't know what to do. And we all—you know how a pack of children will say—we figured it was Indian, something that the Indians had buried back there. Well, instead of us marking the place where it was, we all run home to tell our parents about finding it. And they went back with us and we never did find it. We never did find out. And I've often wondered about it, after I grew up.

Sometimes, when the adults were busy elsewhere, children jumped up and down on the beds. Then they dressed in the grown-ups' clothes and pretended to be grown themselves. Often the children ran out to the edge of the woods, picked blackberries, and had a feast. At hog-killing time their fathers would blow up the hog bladders, and the children would use these as balloons.

Older boys and girls also devised their own games. The favorite sports for the boys were baseball and football. They had no money to



Unidentified mill village children, Franklinville, ca. 1900.



Gastonia mill workers, 1908. There were an estimated 600 to 1,000 children working in Gaston County mills in the early 1930s.

buy equipment. A man who later made a fortune in the construction business described how they managed to play.

We played football on Sunday . . . on the Lily Meadow. Take one of our caps and tie a ear of corn up in it and throw it down to the other end, and when you got back in the honeysuckle that was on the other end, it was a touchdown. It was a rough game. One boy who came out to play learned how tough it could be. Well, he said he was going to make a touchdown or die, and we pulled his hair loose from his head and tore his nose up, and he said he never expected to play any more football.

Boys also went swimming in the creek, hunting, and fishing. A dangerous thrill they discovered involved jumping on a boxcar as the train pulled out of the Carrboro station. The engineer found them and ended that contest quickly. A longer-lasting adventure was the secret cave they discovered and fixed up as a clubhouse. They covered the entrance with timber and trash. An old barrel, placed to one side, was the entry way. A short crawl through the barrel brought them to the cave. Inside the club they played the forbidden game—poker.

A swimming pool was built in Carrboro, and small children, adolescent boys, and men could go swimming for a nickel. Girls and

women could not go in the pool. Girls were watched more carefully than boys and usually stayed close to their homes. Their favorite recreation was to gather in somebody's house for a party. In the summer girls would make ice cream. Other seasons they would have different refreshments and games, as one elderly woman recalled.

Somebody'd have a party every once in a while. We had a good time. I always loved to play checkers. And rook. We'd meet at each other's homes and play rook. And if it met with me, we'd serve something. Wherever, they'd serve . . . sandwiches, drinks, nuts, and homemade fudge.

Since television did not exist then and radios were crude, homemade sets that crackled, people entertained their families and friends by telling stories. In the summertime boys and girls would sit on the porch steps late at night, telling ghost stories in the dark. People believed that it was possible, in times of trouble, to see a living person's spirit coming down the road before the person actually was visible. Many stories had this theme. Often in these stories the ghost people or animals appeared as messengers to the living to warn them that something was going to happen.



Mill village children owned few toys and had little time for games between schoolwork and mill work. The school playground provided a rare chance to have fun. Franklinville, ca. 1920s.



Families of mill superintendents enjoyed many things unavailable to average mill workers. There was money to buy fancy dolls, nice clothes, and special furniture. Franklinville, ca. 1910.

The following story, long remembered, is one they puzzled over.

But I know my aunt, who used to live out there . . . was telling about one night she was going home. People used to travel at night. You know, they thought nothing about it. She was just going through the woods; and beside the path, she said, was a little lamb, just lying there. And she wondered where the little lamb came from, because nobody around had sheep. And she said she thought, "Well, that's odd." But she went on home. And the next day she went back to see about it, and there was no lamb. There was no sign of it ever having been there or anything. And she thought it was a ghost.

Other stories concerned family history, often Civil War experiences, that parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles told. One woman remembered that her father often

talked to her about the battle of Gettysburg, and she told his story to her friends.

My daddy served in the war for four years. And he got shot through both hips. . . . And I know he said he stayed in a little old log cabin they had for a hospital. And they put a bucket of water over him, and drove a little tiny nail hole so it would just drip. . . . And that water, that's all he had done to him, was that water dripping in that hole, that bullet hole, till the fire got out of it. . . . He said that when that water would give out up there, he'd scream like murder. . . . He still stayed on in the service, till it was over with.

These family oral histories reveal the demand for family loyalty, hard work, endurance, and thrift. The programs young people participated in at the Methodist or Baptist churches, the only two churches in Carrboro,

also emphasized moral behavior and family loyalty. But church was also a means of socializing and having fun, as shown in an exchange between the preacher and one youth.

[W]e used to have children's programs, you know, at night? And Preacher Shelton got up, talking about the program and complimented it, and said how wonderful it is to be a child. And he said what we all would have missed had we never been children. And thinking of Adam, he said, "Can any of you wonderful boys and girls tell me a man that never was a boy?" Roy held up his hand—he was my cousin—and Mr. Shelton says, "All right, Roy, you tell us." Roy said (pointing to the child beside him), "Louise Mann." Oh, that was so funny! Actually, everybody was laughing. Preacher Shelton said that knocked his speech out of him.

The churches presented programs that gave young people the opportunity to learn

poems, to act, and to gain experience in public speaking. Afterward the walk home allowed sweethearts to be together.

A lot of hard work faced children in the mill, and chores awaited them at home. Restrictions existed, especially on girls. But these men and women in their early years used imagination to create toys, games, secret places, stories, and memories that have lasted them a lifetime. 

#### SOURCES:

Interviews of Carrboro families by Hugh Brinton, Brent Glass, and Valerie Quinney, 1974 and 1975, Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



These Franklinville residents posed in front of the old Methodist church in the late 1890s. The rural setting was typical of the early mill villages built along fast-running rivers in the state.



## FROM COTTON TO CLOTH: STEP BY STEP

by Julia C. Bonham\*

Raw cotton, pressed into bales and loaded on wagons, traveled toward Charlotte cotton mills in 1898. Each bale averaged 500 pounds. At the mill the bales were opened by a machine that tore the cotton lumps and flakes apart.

American cotton manufacturing began in New England before 1840. Great strides in machinery designs, job classifications, and mill buildings occurred during this period. These developments spread to North Carolina's piedmont region as early as the 1820s and 1830s. The industry continued to expand in importance and size throughout the nineteenth century. In 1860 North Carolina was the poorest state in the South. By 1900 this state led the South in industrialization—largely due to textile manufacturing.

Although changes in the size and number of mills occurred, the basic machinery and jobs seemed to change far less dramatically after the great period of innovation ended around 1840. Of course there continued to be technical developments of great importance. Machines increased in size and speed. Automatic controls evolved to reduce labor costs and improve the production process. On occasion a new machine emerged to replace the old technology. Nevertheless the basic steps of cotton textile

manufacturing—opening, picking, carding, drawing, roving, spinning, warping, dressing, and weaving—stayed the same. Jobs tending the machines remained stable as well, although automatic devices allowed some jobs to be eliminated or caused workers to handle more machines than before.

An easy way to understand the work of a nineteenth-century cotton mill is to discuss each step involved in turning raw cotton into cloth. Two major processes had to be done to make cloth: **spinning** and **weaving**. Each of these processes involved many individual steps. To prepare for spinning, the cotton had to be opened, picked, carded, drawn, and turned into roving. After spinning, the cotton had to be readied for weaving. To prepare for weaving, some yarn had to be turned into warping, dressed, and then woven with other yarn.

**Opening** and **picking** the cotton were the first steps in breaking open and cleaning the baled raw cotton. The bales were loosened and

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In the picker room about fifty bales of cotton were opened at a time. Picker hands stacked the raw cotton in layers on the floor. Gastonia, 1939.

dirt and short fibers removed to produce clean cotton of uniform length and texture. In the earliest nineteenth-century mills male workers performed the opening and picking functions by hand, stacking the bundles in layers on the picker-room floor. This method proved too expensive and required too much floor space. Mechanical substitutes soon appeared. Opening machines featured a revolving cylinder with spikes or flat beaters. The cylinder turned beside a stationary surface studded with more spikes. This tore open the cotton.

After opening the cotton the workers (or in later years automatic conveyor systems) carried the partially cleaned cotton to the picking machines. Nineteenth-century pickers consisted of a set of feed rollers, one or more beaters, flat surfaces called aprons, a fan system, and a cylinder or cage. Picker hands [workers] usually were men. They spread the cotton on the apron. A belt system transported the cotton to the feed rollers and into the revolving beaters. The beaters hit the cotton and continued the opening process. The cotton then traveled on another apron to a revolving cage or cylinder. A powerful fan system above the cylinder caused dust and dirt to be removed from the cotton fibers pressed against the side of the turning cylinder.

The cotton emerged from the finisher picker in lap form [a huge roll of cotton], ready for the **carding machine**. The carding machine performed the same job that women spinners did in their homes when they brushed the cotton by hand with cotton cards [or combs] to

straighten out the fibers. The carding machine, however, was much faster. It removed whatever dirt and knotted bits of cotton remained in the lap. It also disentangled the fibers and laid them in a parallel, lengthwise position. The teeth on the carding machine cut off fibers from the end of the lap and sent them to be combed by wire teeth into the consistency of fleece. Then the machine fed the combed fibers onto several pairs of rollers. These transformed the cotton into a continuous rope or **sliver**. At the end of the carding machine a series of large revolving cans collected the coiled sliver before it was sent to the drawing frame.

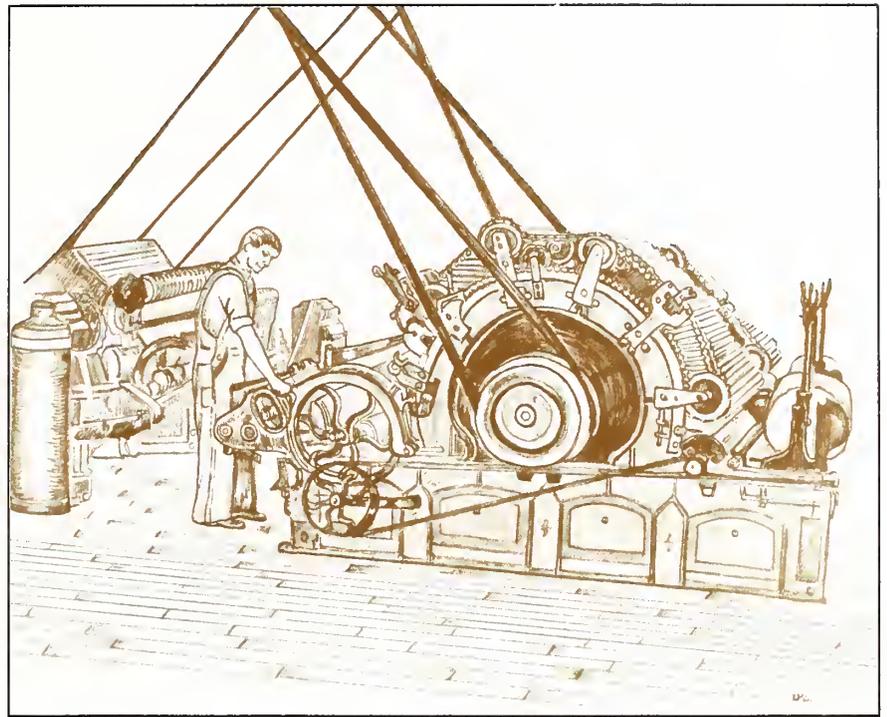
The most interesting jobs associated with carding, usually handled by male employees, involved stripping and grinding the carding machine. Paid by the day, the stripper hand-cleaned matted cotton out of the wire teeth of carding machines. Grinders periodically ground and sharpened the thousands of wire teeth on the carding machine.

The **drawing frame** improved the strength of the sliver by eliminating thin or weak spots along the body of the rope. The nineteenth-century drawing frame consisted of three or four sets of paired rollers. Each set of rollers went faster than the ones before. This pulled and stretched the sliver into a tighter bundle of fibers. By feeding several slivers into one drawing frame at the same time, called doubling, the manufacturer lessened the defects of any single sliver and produced a better product. Women drawing-frame tenders, often working



The picker hand is removing or "doffing" a huge roll of cotton from the picker machine. This roll of cotton, called a lap, went from the picker to the carding machine.

Carding machine, ca. 1930s. The carding machine continued the cleaning process begun by the picker machine.



in pairs, had to “piece up” or mend broken slivers. Even though most American drawing frames automatically turned off when a sliver broke, the women remained very busy because the general weakness of slivers meant that breakage was common.

The final step in preparing cotton for spinning changed the easily broken sliver into a stronger product called **roving**. Roving could withstand the rigors of mechanical spinning without breaking. To achieve this goal a **roving frame** received the cotton sliver and twisted it to improve its strength. The roving was then wound around roving bobbins [spools].

With the transformation of the sliver into roving, the cotton was finally ready for spinning. Spinning twisted the loose roving into fine, tight threads suitable for weaving into cloth. During the nineteenth century three spinning-machine designs proved popular. One of these was the **throstle frame**. It spun thread in one continuous operation. It consisted of a **creel** [a tall rack of bars with skewers to hold the roving bobbins], a set of rollers, a row of spindles, flyers [devices that revolved above the spindles to guide and insert twist into the roving], and empty bobbins. The empty bobbins fitted over the spindles. Roving passed from the rollers to the flyers and onto the slowly revolving bobbins. This process put the twist into roving.

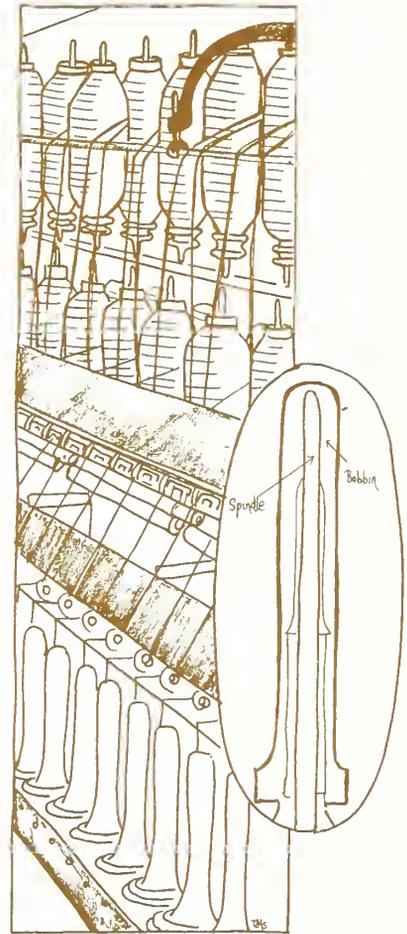
The female hands tending the throstle frame pieced up broken threads and creeled



This Gastonia card grinder sharpened the thousands of wire teeth on the carding machine.



[Left] Rocky Mount, February, 1945. Women spinners "pieced up" or mended broken threads on the spinning frames and replaced bobbins. [Right] Detail of spinning frame showing how hollow bobbins fitted over the revolving spindles at the bottom of the spinning frame. Roving from the bobbins at the top passed through the machine to the empty bobbins. The machine twisted the roving into a finer, tighter thread.



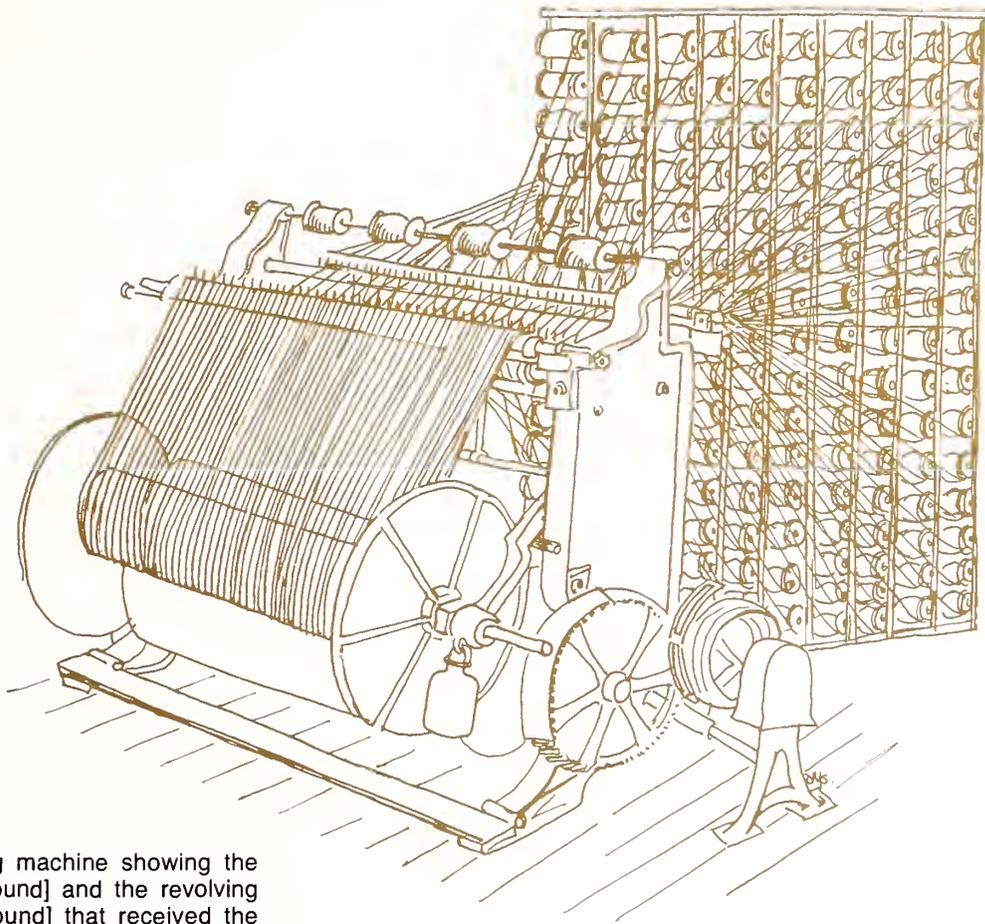
the machine. This meant they replaced empty roving bobbins with fresh ones loaded with roving. The mill company typically paid throstle spinners by the machine side (two sides to a machine). The number of sides tended by one hand depended upon the length of the throstle frame. In addition to spinners there were workers called doffers. Doffers replaced full yarn bobbins with empty ones. Children frequently performed the doffing operation.

Another continuous spinning machine, called the **ring frame**, grew in popularity after 1860. North Carolina millowners especially liked this spinning frame. The ring frame offered improvements over the throstle spinner by speeding up the spinning process and using less power. The workers in a ring-spinning room performed the same jobs as workers in a throstle-spinning room.

A third popular spinning machine spun and wound yarn in two distinct motions. This machine, named an intermittent or mule-spinning machine, required the skilled labor of a male worker. In mule spinning the roving passed from a creel, through rollers, to spindles mounted on a carriage. The carriage moved back and forth several feet on rails. The outward movement spun the roving. The return of the carriage wound the spun thread onto paper tubes placed over the spindles.

The mule spinner usually ran two mule sides. Assistants helped the mule spinner. These assistants frequently were children, and they were called piecers. The piecers fixed broken threads while the machine was running by slipping between the creel and the carriage during the carriage's outward run.

Upon the completion of the spinning process, the yarn had to be prepared for weaving.



Beam-warping machine showing the creel [background] and the revolving beam [foreground] that received the warp threads used for weaving cloth. Women ran between two and eight of these machines at a time.

The particular method depended on how the yarn would be used on the loom. Woven fabric consists of the **warp** [strands of yarn running vertically in the cloth] and the **weft** or filling [yarn running horizontally across the warp]. The warp and weft are interlaced together to produce woven cloth.

To prepare the spun yarn intended for warping, the yarn had to be taken off bobbins and rewound on large spools called beams. This required another piece of equipment called the **beam-warping machine**. It consisted of a creel to hold yarn bobbins and a revolving beam that received the threads of yarn. The operative tending the beam warper was responsible for making sure that the thousands of strands of thread passed onto the beam evenly and in a compact fashion.

In the late-nineteenth century women ran the beam warpers. They were paid by the beam and handled between two and eight machines, depending upon the amount of

help they had in filling the creels. Once the warping was completed the warp yarn frequently passed through a machine that applied starch to strengthen it.

Now the yarn finally was ready for the **loom**. In the weave room a male worker attached the warp beam to the back of the loom. Then the weaver (or drawer-in) guided the warp ends across the loom through the eyes of wire harnesses and attached them to another beam at the front of the loom. This beam received the woven cloth.

The nineteenth-century power loom raised and lowered portions of the warp in a special pattern so that the weft fibers could be passed through the spaces created by the separation of the warp. After each passage of the weft shuttle across the warp, the loom adjusted the warp again, reversing the pattern of raised and lowered warp. Then the shuttle traveled back through the warp. In this way interlacing of the warp and weft occurred.



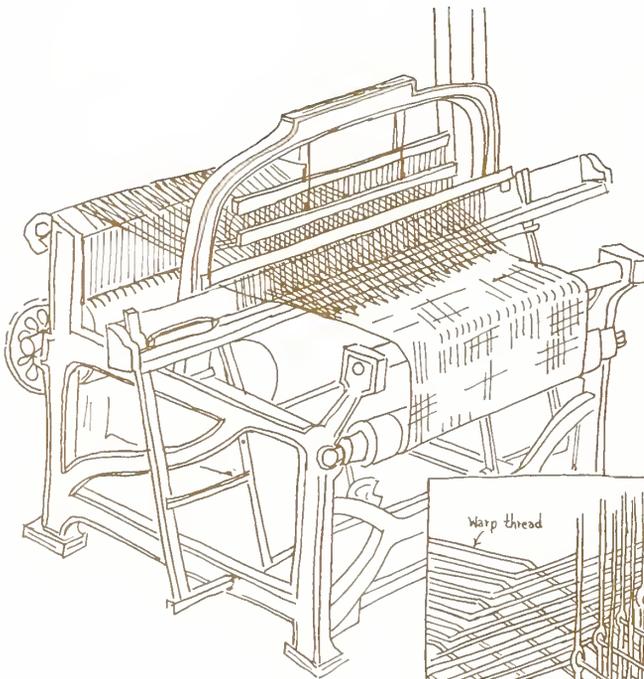
This Gastonia woman performed one of the most skilled operations in a 1939 mill. She was "drawing-in" over 3,000 warp threads through loom "heddles." Each thread had to be drawn through exactly the right heddle for the correct pattern to appear on the cloth.

The throwing of the shuttle from side to side was called **picking**. Picking devices included a pointed shuttle box and mechanical levers that threw the shuttle with great speed from one side to another. Once a pick (weft yarn) had been laid, it was necessary to press it against the previous picks to form a tightly woven fabric. A horizontal bar called the lay packed the weft together for this purpose.

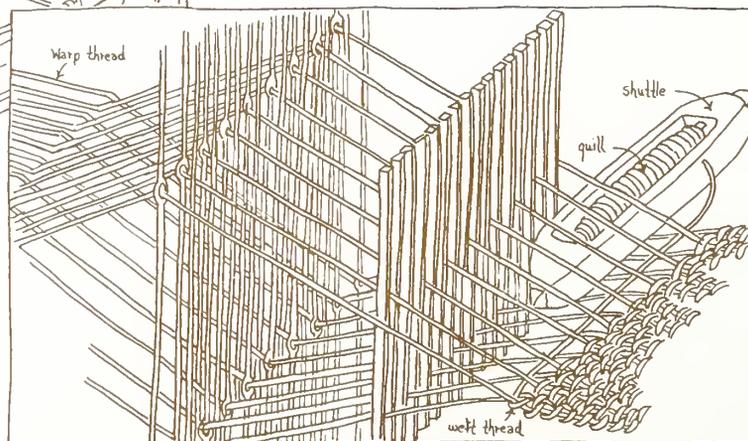
The weaver, characteristically a young woman, tended more than one machine. She was responsible for spotting and fixing broken warp ends and replacing empty shuttles. She frequently earned a "piece rate" based on the number of pieces of cloth produced per day.

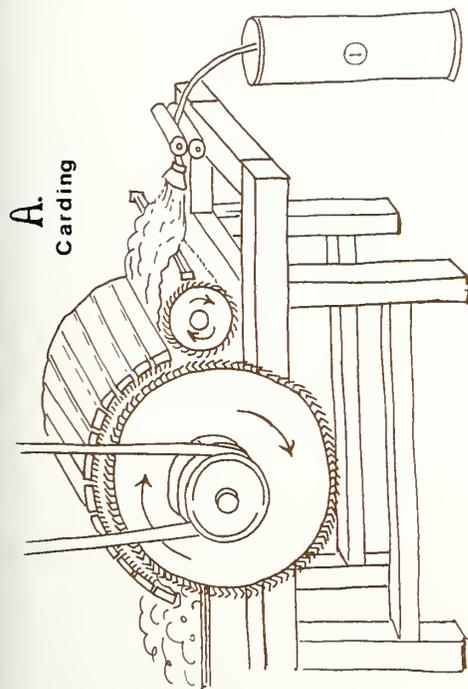
After weaving, the cloth frequently underwent further processing in the form of bleaching, dyeing or printing, and finishing. These final stages of cotton manufacture occurred at independent businesses during the nineteenth century.

The production of nineteenth-century cloth required complicated, noisy machines and constant monitoring. It also needed the considerable strength and dexterity of the men, women, and children who ran the machines and created cloth used across America. 

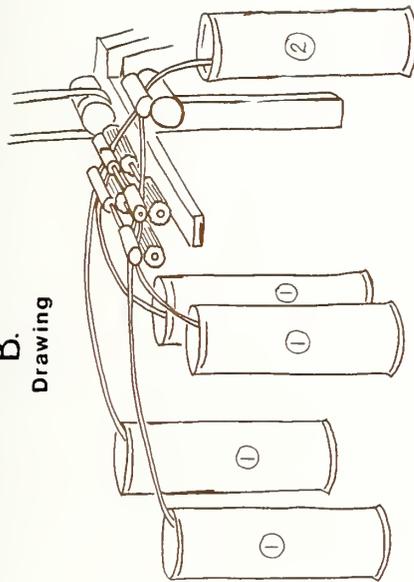


Loom, with detail of warp and weft threads. The shuttle interlaced the weft with the warp.

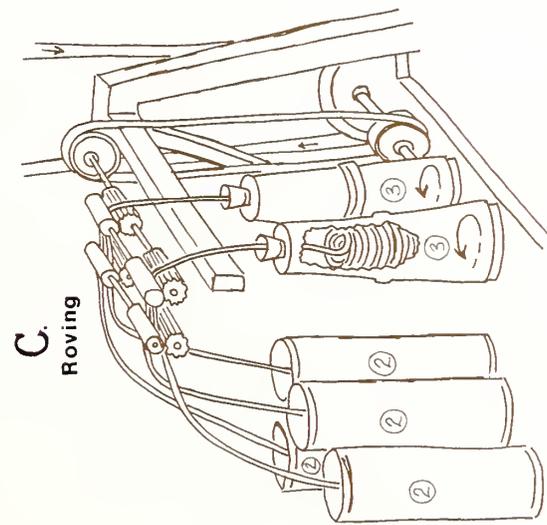




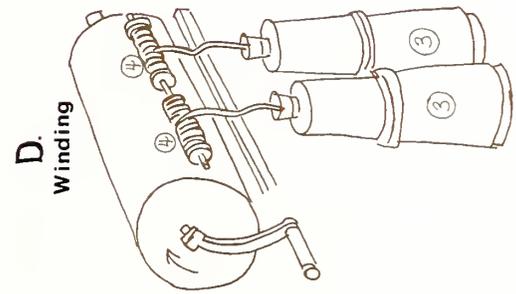
**A.**  
Carding



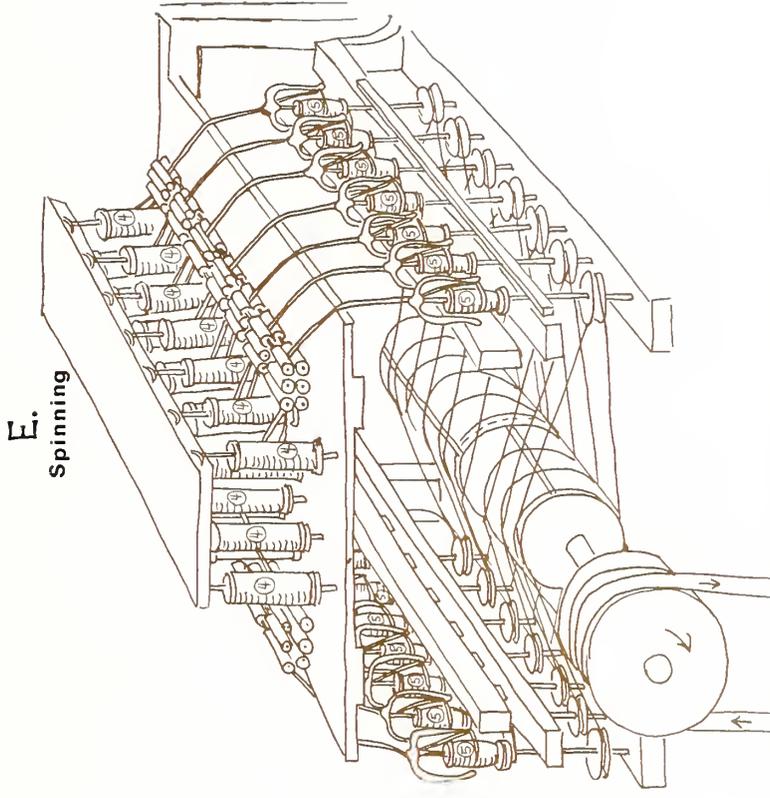
**B.**  
Drawing



**C.**  
Roving



**D.**  
Winding



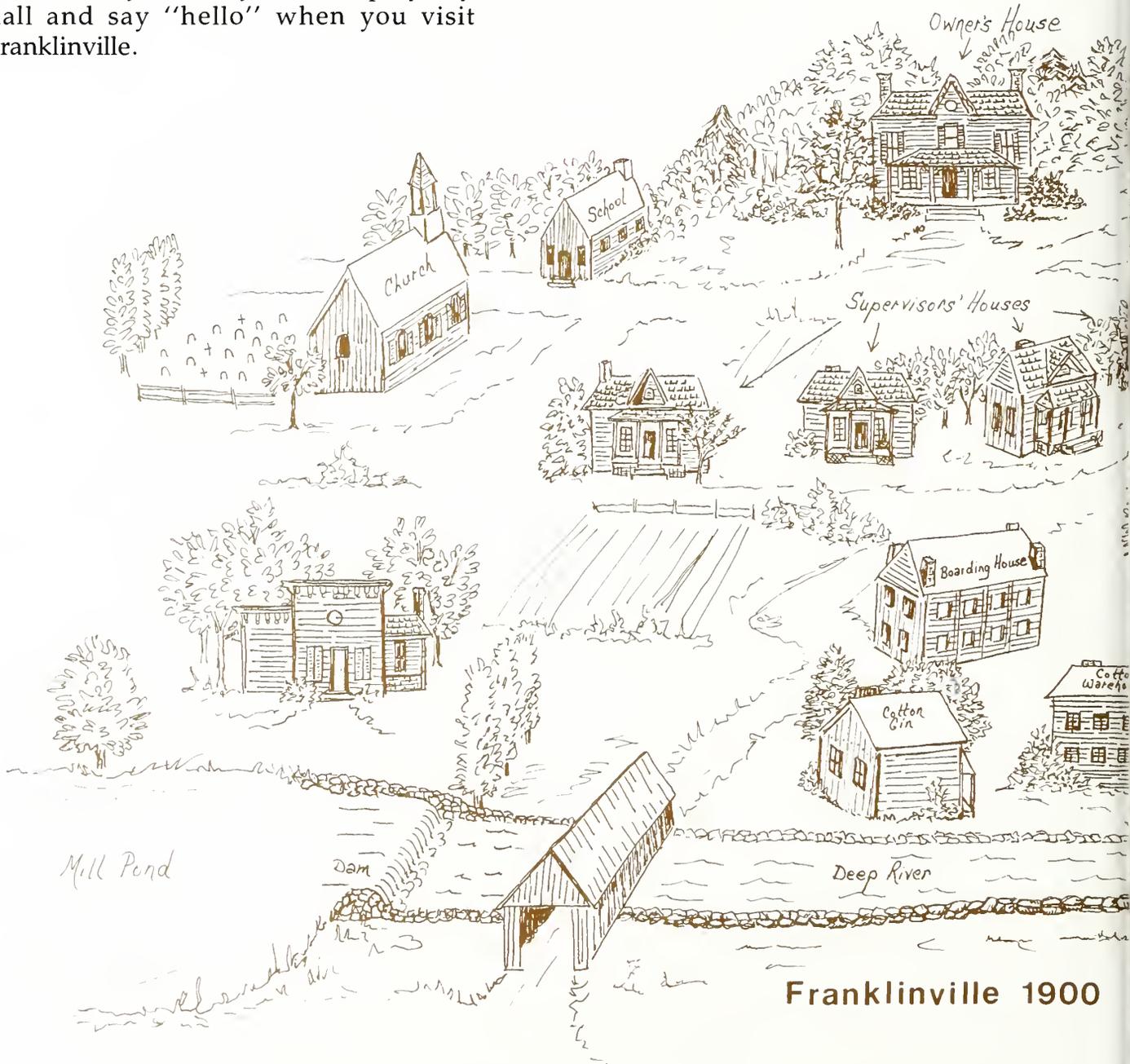
**E.**  
Spinning

From cotton to cloth: A. Raw cotton is carded (1) and turned into loose sliver. B. Cans of sliver are drawn, tightened, and combined (2) into a stronger sliver. C. The drawn sliver passes through the roving frame (3) where it is twisted and strengthened for spinning. D. The canned roving is wound around roving bobbins (4) that fit on the spinning frame. E. The spinning frame twists the roving into fine, tight threads (5) suitable for weaving into cloth.

# "A Two-Hundred-Headed Family"

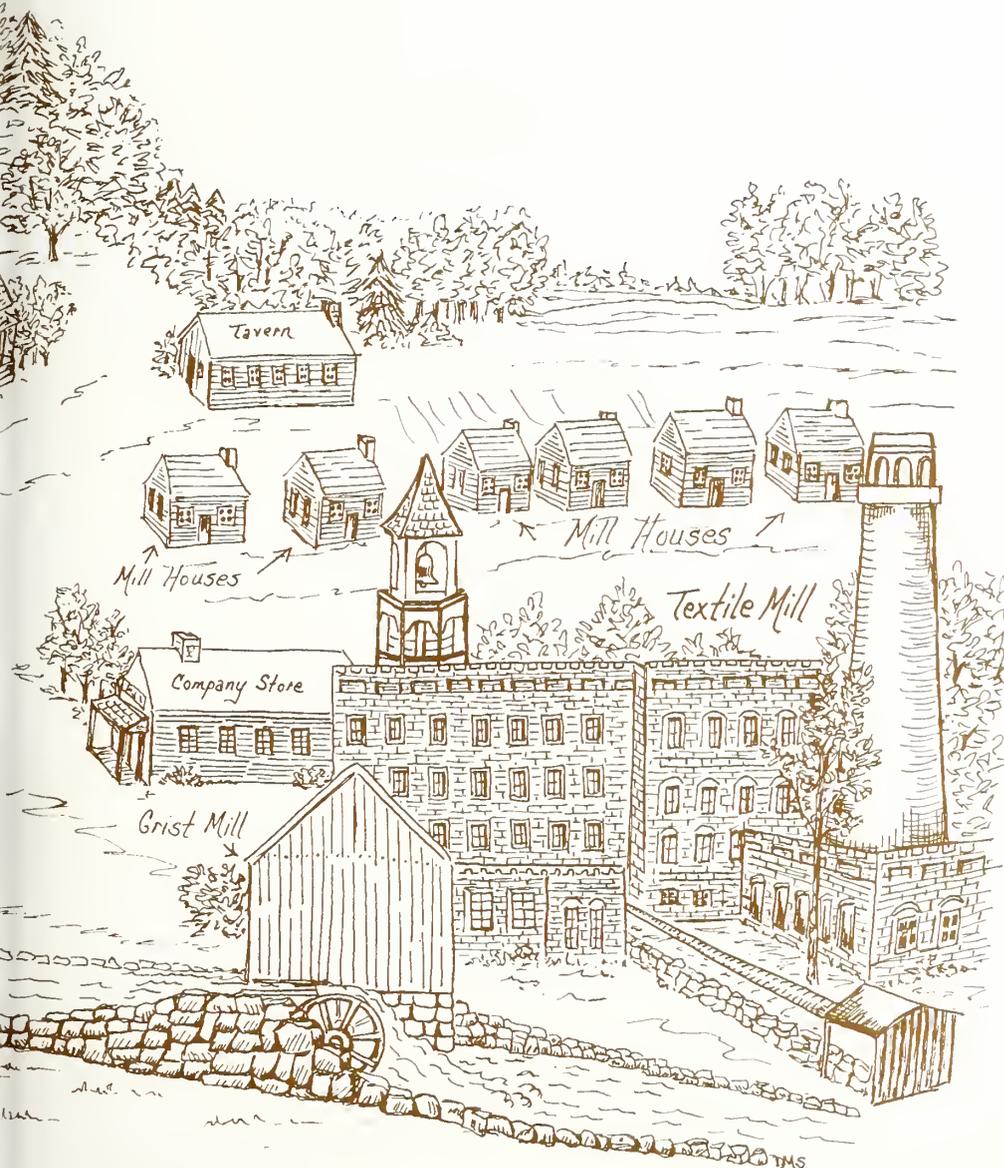
The men, women, and children who worked together in textile mills also lived together in towns that were built by the millowners. One of these company towns is Franklinville in Randolph County—North Carolina's first incorporated textile mill village. You can visit Franklinville and see many of its original buildings—the mill, the church, the owner's house, and the workers' homes. The original company store collapsed and burned, but the 1920 company store is still standing. Mayor Mac Whatley invites you to drop by city hall and say "hello" when you visit Franklinville.

1. Answer these short questions to become familiar with the map. Of the eleven houses, how many belonged to owners, to supervisors, and to workers? Are the streets laid out in a regular or irregular pattern? What kind of power was used to drive the mill machinery? Is there a railroad, a river, telephone poles and lines, a school? What is a cotton gin? What is a gristmill?
2. Rural and urban mill towns did not share all the same features. Six features of Franklinville show that it was a rural mill town in 1900. List at least three of these features, using the information in articles one and four.



Franklinville 1900

3. If you drew a detailed sketch of the row of mill houses, what four items would you need to include in the backyards? How many of each (for the six houses depicted)? Use the information in articles one, two, four, and seven. How did this contribute to the sense of community—of family—that mill workers remember?
  - a. How does the placement of the supervisors' houses help them "identify any social problems"? (Article One.)
  - b. How does the placement and design of the mill houses show the owner's control of the workers' private lives? (Article One; Article Four, paragraph 2.)
  - c. How does the placement of *all* the houses represent paternalism?
4. Mill towns were described as paternalistic. Like a father ("pater" in Latin), the millowner provided for his workers and in the process also controlled them. This paternalism can be seen in the layout of houses in Franklinville.
  - a. How does the placement of the supervisors' houses help them "identify any social problems"? (Article One.)
  - b. How does the placement and design of the mill houses show the owner's control of the workers' private lives? (Article One; Article Four, paragraph 2.)
  - c. How does the placement of *all* the houses represent paternalism?
5. Note the unidentified building in the lower left of the map. From information in articles one, two, and three, you can list five possible identifications of this building. Considering its location near the mill pond and distance from the mill, which of the identifications would you choose? To learn what it was, ask Mayor Whatley when you visit Franklinville.



Complete this chart to compare your week with the week of a fourteen-year-old mill worker in 1900. Estimate the mill worker's hours for playing and doing chores from article five and from the student interview with Victor Potts. Put your hours in the right-hand column for each day and for the total hours.

	M		T		W		Th		F		S		S		Total	
Job	12		12		12		12		12		6		0		66	
Sleep	8		8		8		8		8		8		8		56	
School	0		0		0		0		0		0		0		0	
Church	0		0		0		0		0		0		3		3	
Chores																
Play																
Totals	24		24		24		24		24		24		24		168	

### How do your lives compare?

- On a weekday, how many hours does the mill worker spend at work and asleep? How many hours are left for chores and for play?
- About 40% of the mill worker's week is spent at work (66 of 168 hours). How much of your week is spent at work? How much is spent at school and doing schoolwork?
- What would you trade in your week's schedule with the mill worker? What do you think the mill worker would want to trade with you?



An unidentified Franklinville mill village family, ca. 1910.

## THE EVOLUTION OF TEXTILE MILL VILLAGES

by Bennett M. Judkins and Dorothy Lodge\*

Large-scale expansion of southern textile mills began in the 1880s. Many people left the farms and the mountains to begin work in these mills. Although they would have preferred to stay on their farms and remain independent, they had lost their land because they could not pay taxes and were indebted to merchants as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. Mill companies offered to move them, their families, and their possessions to the new mill villages to encourage them to undertake "public work," or work for wages outside the home. Steady wages, the company store, and mill houses were strong attractions.

From 1880 until about 1930 southern mill towns showed a continuation of the paternalism that marked slave plantations. Paternalism, which comes from a word meaning father, indicates that the millowner had many of the rights and responsibilities of a father to his workers. The millowner provided shelter, jobs, medical care, schooling, and maintained authority over the private lives of his employees.

The pattern of paternalism gained hold in part because of the large number of workers coming into towns to work in the mills. They all needed housing and services, and only the

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millowners had the money to provide these. Houses, company stores, churches, and schools all became a part of the emerging mill villages. The villages remained under the complete control of the mill management.

Some of the people who lived in mill villages in Gaston County in the 1920s and 1930s described their lives in the mills and mill villages for a 1985 oral history project conducted for the North Carolina Humanities Committee. They remembered the houses, the work, and the strong sense of community the workers shared. Mill housing, for instance, consisted of small, often crowded rooms. Many had no bathrooms or indoor plumbing. As one mill worker reflected, "We had an outhouse in the back. . . . We had a big old white commode thing. Didn't have water to flush it. You washed it with the slop jars full of water. That toilet was really nice. You wouldn't be afraid to go and set on it."

By the 1920s almost all the houses had electric lights, something infrequently found at that time even on prosperous rural farms. The number of light bulbs a house burned determined the rent paid by that household. "That was the way you paid your rent, was 25 cents a light bulb. A lot of them didn't have a

light bulb on the back porch because that would have cost a quarter. That paid for all the utilities, too."

The benefits of mill housing caused some discontent among workers in the twentieth century who did not rent homes from the company. Employees living outside company housing enjoyed independence. They disliked losing the advantages offered those living in the mill villages, however.

. . . [T]his town has always had two classes of workers—the ones in company houses, and the ones like me who have their own places. People in the Cannon houses were taken care of. They paid low rent, no taxes, and the company did all of the maintenance. They had it made all of their lives. The rest of us had to pay for all of this. What it meant was the man working beside you at the same job for the same pay was getting two dollars an hour more in benefits you weren't getting.

Millowners required that at least two, sometimes three members of a family work in the mill before the company would rent a mill house to that family. Fathers, mothers, and children often would work together in the same mill. This kept the families together, but it also meant that children faced demanding



This Gaston County mill village enjoyed a choral club that performed at community gatherings, 1939.



Gastonia, North Carolina, 1908. Notice the cotton lint on the boys' clothing.

jobs at an early age. From the 1880s well into the twentieth century children as young as eight and nine years of age would work at least part-time in the factories. Full-time work began around the start of the teenage years. A seventy-four-year-old mill worker recalled what it was like when she began to work in a mill at the age of eleven as an assistant to the women spinners. She described the big machinery and how hard it was to learn the work at the speed required.

There are rollers on the spinning frames. . . . [Y]ou had to pick them with your fingers. And oh my fingers would get so sore! I would tear the spinners' ends down—see I didn't know how to put up an end—and of course they would get furious because it would get them behind in their work. I learned to put up the ends that I tore down picking the rollers, and that was the way I learned to spin.

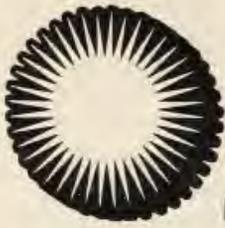
Another mill employee began work at the age of fourteen. Her mother trained her on the job, and together they put in a very long day. "I went to the mill when I was fourteen years old, and my mother learnt me to reel. We worked eleven hours a day and got an hour for dinner. . . . We got up of a morning to be at work by 6:00 [A.M.]."

After work the family shopping was done at the company store, a practice encouraged by

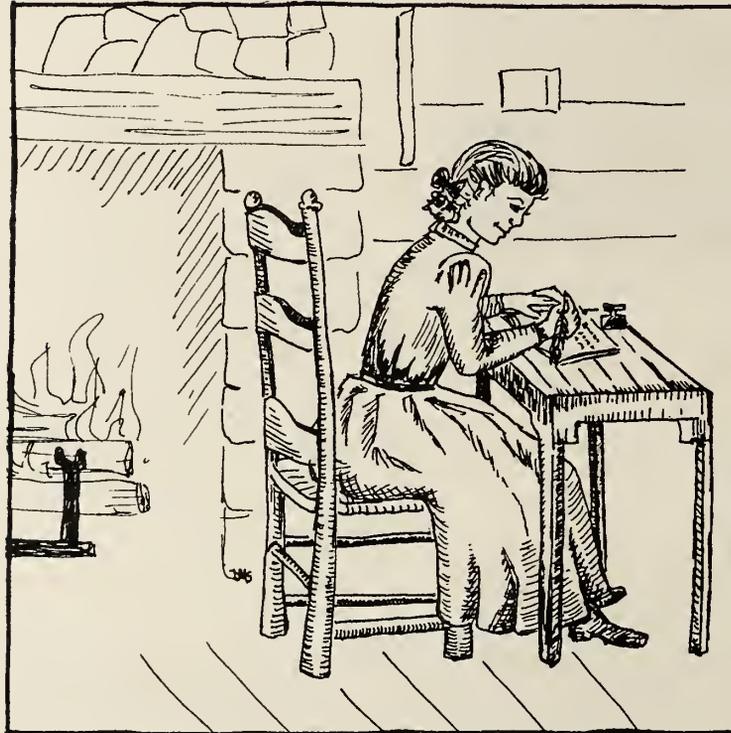
millowners who frequently charged more for goods than stores outside the mill villages. As one employee stated, "Almost everything you bought was bought out of the store. At one time they had these coupon books, and they were worth 5, 10, 15, 20 cents, and so on. They'd give you one of the books as part of your pay. You'd take that into the store and use it for a Coca-Cola, or whatever you wanted."

The prosperity of mill villages remained closely tied to the economic health of the textile industry. When trouble hit the management, it quickly filtered down to the workers. After 1930 many changes occurred as millowners sought to increase their profits during times of depression and low prices. The paternalistic image fostered by the companies gave way to more "modern" industrial relations. The owners and managers stressed technology and performance over a sense of family. Less and less did the owners know the names of their workers or show a fatherly concern over their welfare. The textile industry met falling prices and increasing American and foreign competition with improved automation in the mills. This cost many workers their jobs. Small family-owned mill companies, unable to compete, were sold to large corporations. New workers entered the labor pool, especially blacks recruited from outside the mill community. These trends weakened the close interactions of mill village residents. The sense of being one big family disappeared. One worker mourned, "I use to know everybody who lived up and down that street . . . and over the street behind me. No more, everybody's moving." An employee who worked at Cannon Mills for thirty-nine years deplored the sale of that family mill to investor David Murdock and summed up the difference it made in the work atmosphere. "Mr. Cannon was family. Mr. Murdock's the Boss."

The sale of mill villages by mill companies has increased as textile plants have closed or merged with other companies. From 1982 to 1985 over 10,000 North Carolina textile workers lost their jobs when sixty-seven plants closed. Factories continue to shut down every year. The workers often face hardships in finding new jobs after spending a lifetime at one job in one factory. It is a sad end to the cotton textile industry that for 100 years served as the economic foundation of North Carolina. Those who built the companies, and those who worked in this industry have had a major impact on our state and its people. The social history of North Carolina's textile mill villages is an important part of our heritage that should not be forgotten. 



# SPOTLIGHT



*MY LIFE AT GLENCOE*  
*The Imaginary Diary of an 1886 Mill Village Girl*  
by Heather Wilson

**February 19, 1886.**

Today I am sad. My grandmother lived such a short life, and now it is over. She has died. She was forty-nine. There are arrangements to be made. Mama and I must make her shroud. Papa and some other men will dig her grave. Relatives will be coming soon. Each night someone will watch her body all night. People will soon come and pay their respects to her.

I don't understand. My grandmother has worked in the mill ever since she was a child. Recently she started complaining of her throat burning and not being able to breathe from time to time. It seems queer. Becky's grandfather died too, about a year ago. The company doctor said the same thing to her that he did to us. He said, "Must have smoked too much." But grandma never smoked. I've noticed lots of people in the village complain of the same symptoms, and as they grow older they die.

**March 6, 1886.**

Yesterday and today have been quite exciting. Yesterday afternoon Adam Cook and Cassandra Wright were caught kissing. All of this is confidential. Only my family and their families know. We are all keeping quiet because if Uncle James (the millowner) finds out, Cassandra's family could be thrown out of the village.

**March 7, 1886.**

Oh my goodness, oh my goodness, Uncle James found out. Worse than that, someone else spoke up and said Cassandra had kissed other boys. Now Uncle James has dismissed them from the village. I'm not too worried though because all the mills need help right now. They won't have any trouble finding jobs.

**August 12, 1886.**

Today was a horrid day. Uncle James was upset with

me because I made a "C" on my math test. He said I could do better than that.

This morning I woke up sweating from the heat of the day. Then, because Joshua was ill, I had to get the wood for mother so she could start breakfast. Since I'm now ten years old I have hard work to do and very little time to do it. After lunch (which I go home to have) I work in the mill for the afternoon.

The mill is humid and hot. Uncle James says it's because we have to keep the cotton fibers damp so they won't break while they are being woven. He also says he wants to get the mill fixed so it won't be so hot.

#### December 20, 1886.

Today was a wonderful day. The mill wasn't hot and nothing got stuck. Winter is a really good time. Cozy wool blankets to curl up in and jackets, scarves, and socks.

There's snow on the ground, even the soil is icy! The air is frigid. I'm so excited I'm about to jump out of my

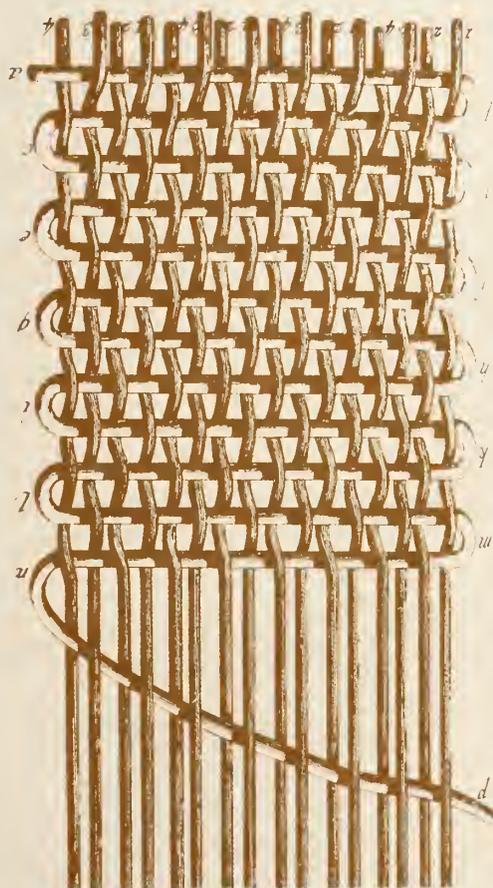
seat. My birthday is coming soon, and Christmas isn't that far away. I'm wishing for Uncle James to bring me a book and mother a parasol as Christmas gifts.

#### January 19, 1887.

We just got back from the company store. Papa is considering a proposal to join a labor union. A man from Greensboro may come and have a meeting with Papa if he shows an interest in joining. I think the man will come because my family goes to the company store regularly, and Papa noticed the prices are too high. The workers are angry about that and also angry because they are forced to shop there. It really annoys people when Uncle James puts up signs saying, "I cannot live without you or some others like you, and you cannot live without me or someone like me. Our interests are therefore mutual and the more I make the better wages I can pay you. You should do what you can to help me." 



Heather Wilson  
George Watts Tar Heel Junior Historians  
George Watts Elementary School  
Durham



## THE WAY IT WAS

by Sherry Hazelwood

Emory Joyce worked at home on a farm until 1933 when, at the age of eighteen, he went to work at Washington Mills in Mayodan, North Carolina. Since there was no employment office at the mill Joyce got his job by going to see Charlie Carter, the foreman at Washington Mills at the time. Joyce got his job as a sewing-machine operator the very same day. He sewed buttons on union suits [underwear].

During the years Joyce worked at Washington Mills there were no fringe benefits like hospital insurance, vacation pay, or retirement. One benefit of working for the company, however, was that most of the houses were owned by the mill. The mill rented the houses to the employees for a very low fee. Joyce rented a five-room house. The rent, lights, and water cost \$2.18 a week.

During these years Mayodan was very different from today. Most of the houses had outhouses. There was no running water except in a few people's homes. Instead there was a spigot [faucet] between every two houses that the families shared. The streets were not paved. There was no sewage system. The town's only policeman also served as the tax collector.

The mill provided a doctor that the employees could go to during the day for free, but if the doctor was needed at night the charge was \$1.00. Prices seem low during the 1930s as compared to the 1980s. But money was so scarce during the Great Depression that it was hard for working people to afford things that cost a dime.

The town had some entertainment. There was a movie theater and a baseball team. The baseball team either played in the afternoons or at nights, usually on Saturday evenings. The people on the baseball team were called semi-pros. This meant that they played ball and also worked in the mill, and they got paid for doing both.

On Sundays everyone went to church. The percentage of people that went to church then is much higher than the percentage who attend church today.

Even very young people had part-time jobs. They would take baskets of food to the mill for the employees because there was no cafeteria. Each basket cost 5 cents.

While Joyce worked at the mill he got promoted several times. From sewing-machine operator he moved to sewing-machine fixer, then assistant foreman, and later foreman. When he left the mill he worked as department manager over the cutting, sewing, and packaging departments.

The management was very different from today. In Joyce's earlier days the millowners had more control over what the employees did. The department managers told the employees what to do, and they had to do it. There was no bargaining whatsoever. Fortunately the people Joyce worked for were fair as long as the employees did the job correctly.

Emory Joyce started work in 1933 and retired in 1978 after forty-five years of service. He initially worked eleven hours every night, five nights a week, at 10 cents an hour.

The mill now has its own cafeteria and air-conditioning. Washington Mills has changed very much over the years, including its name. It is now known as Tultex.

I interviewed Mr. Joyce because my mother and grandmother used to work for him. He is married to Margaret Joyce and has two children, Ronald and Nelda. He has five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.



Sherry Hazelwood  
Southeastern Stokes Junior Historians I  
Southeastern Stokes Junior High School  
Walnut Cove



# VICTOR POTTS

by Reid Byers

*Editor's Note:* Reid Byers interviewed Victor Potts of Lowell, North Carolina, to learn about Mr. Potts's experiences while working in the Lowell mills from 1919 until 1954. Mr. Potts currently is retired, but he enjoys doing carpentry work in his workshop.

Hello Mr. Potts, how are you? . . . First of all I would like to know, did you go to school in your mill village?

Yep. Started in 1908. . . .

What did they teach you?

'Rithmetic, spelling, read-back books. . . .

Did you have Bible lessons?

No. That was left for the church. . . .

What did you do at recess?

Well, went to school, then played ball [and] pagget.

What is pagget?

Well, get a stick about that long (motions), sharp as a pencil, lay it on somethin' like that, and hit this end (motions), flips up, then you hit it.

Were there any other sports?

Play ball, shoot marbles, and play pagget. There was no playgrounds or nothin' . . . Wasn't ever no football, no basketball—just baseball.

How big was your typical class?

The whole school [was] just one room. Twenty-five, thirty, maybe more people. . . .

How long did you go to school?

Fourteen I believe it was. Yeah, fourteen, then went to work in the mill. . . . Learnt to doff—pulling bobbins off a pin and puttin' 'em on another. . . .

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Seven brothers, one died when he was two years old. . . .

You said you worked in the mill. Where was the best place to work in a mill?

I usually worked all over the mill. I usually made bands, swept. . . . I really liked overhaul—took frames down and reworked them in somewhere else. . . .



A doffer replacing bobbins.

How much did you make in the mill?

Well, I started at \$2.40 a week. Worked eleven hours a day for \$2.40 a week, that's all we'd draw.

What did your wife do?

She spun [yarn] in the mill. When you went to work in the mill you learned more than one job. . . .

Did you like doing it?

Oh yeah, shoot marbles, yeah we'd get around. See, you'd doff some and wait, then doff some more. Play pagget.

Was this a break or something?

Yeah, back then they didn't care. You could go anywhere. We'd go swimming between doffs. On Wednesday we go to the river, swim, catch fish, they'd let you go anywhere so long as you was on the job when doffs came in.

Did you have a schedule or something when you would know when to come in?

Well, how you gonna laugh at me, but they had a whistle like thing. Well, you know those keys that gotta hole in the middle? He'd put that thing to his mouth and blow it, and we'd hear it at the river.

So work was really a playtime, too.

Oh yeah, that was about the only time you played. Go to work at 6:00 in the morning, come home 6:00 at night.

Did you ever mind the working hours?

No. I was happy when the eight-hour law came in. . . . Yeah, eight hours was good. Seems like [19]30s or [19]40s when that law come in, I can't remember.

Did you ever remember any of the strikes? Like the strike of 1934?

I never did join it, but yeah, they did it down there where we were.

Do you remember what it was for?

More pay, but I think it was just for more money. . . .

Did you cut up much in the mill?

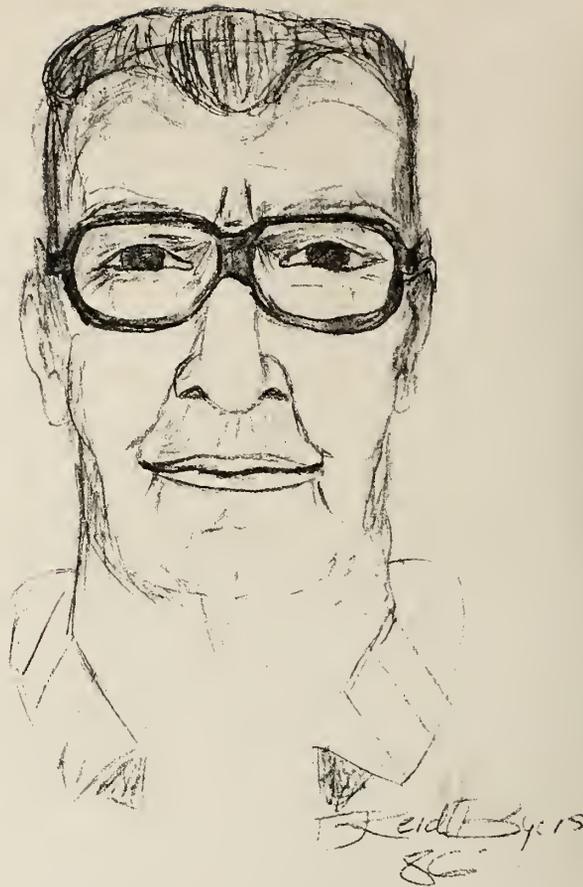
Oh yeah, we had fun, lot of dangerous fun, too. . . . Well, see, the belts were right there—each belt run from atop of the mill to the frame. We'd run, play, holler, and hoot. The boss man get on us, we'd bless him out. We'd play as we worked. Played a lot of tricks on boys. Catch [them] layin' around asleep, tie 'em up to where they couldn't get loose. Just somethin' to do. Some boys would come from other towns to talk to the girls, and we'd go up on the buildin' [and] fill him full of water when he'd come out the door. We had a lot of friends. You knew everybody in Lowell. . . .

What kind of homework did you have?

Oh, we'd pick cotton, milk cows, jobs around the house. You were busy.

Did you like going to school?

Oh yeah. I was too playful. 



Victor Potts, drawn by the author.



Reid Byers  
Catawba Crew  
Holbrook Junior High School  
Lowell



Franklinville mill village residents, ca. 1910.

# *The State History Journal For Inquiring Students*

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