

Life in Southern Mill Villages, 1900s

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The Industrial Revolution in America began to develop in the mid-eighteen hundreds after the Civil War. Prior to this industrial growth the work force was mainly based in agriculture, especially in the South (“Industrial Revolution”). The advancement in machinery and manufacturing on a large scale changed the structure of the work force. Families began to leave the farm and relocate to larger settings to work in the ever-growing industries. One area that saw a major change in the work force was textile manufacturing. Towns in the early nineteen hundreds were established around mills, and workers were subjected to strenuous working conditions. It would take decades before these issues were addressed. Until then, people worked and struggled for a life for themselves and their families. While conditions were harsh in the textile industry, it was the sense of community that sustained life in the mill villages.

It would be hard to imagine what mill life would have been like if it were not for American photographer, Lewis Hine. Hine was influential in bringing public awareness to many social issues of his time. Born in a rural town in Wisconsin in 1874, Hine dedicated his life to capturing America’s cultural landscape through the people in his photographs. He was there when thousands of immigrants took their first steps on American soil at Ellis Island. In World War One he captured on film the heroic efforts of the Red Cross (“Lewis Wickes Hine”). But most importantly for this paper, are his accounts of people in the mill villages and textile factories in rural America. Through some of his pictures, we will explore life in southern mill villages in the nineteen hundreds.

Before the rise of industrialization, wives and mothers made clothing at home. Women would spin their own yarn and make their families' clothing (Glass). For a small income these women would sometimes produce a product for a company out of their homes. These "cottage industries" were all that was needed at the time.

After the Civil War, the South did not want to rely upon the North for all their textile needs despite the North being the major textile manufacturer at that time. More and more factories were built in the South. Cotton mills were built along rivers for their hydropower, usually in rural areas (Glass 14). Mills were also commonly located near railroads to send their finished products throughout the states (Ulrich 15).

Mill owners did not rely slave labor for their work force. The price of purchasing enough slaves to fill the many factory positions was too high. This objection also had racist undertones as well as economic ones. It was believed by some at that time that slaves were not smart enough to learn even the simplest of tasks. Also it was illegal to teach a slave a trade, even one as simple as spinning yarn (Glass 19). Factory owners were forced to rely on the poor people in the surrounding areas for their workforce, especially women and children.

While the new textile industry was growing, the agricultural economy at the time was stagnant. It became harder and harder for farmers to pay off their debts. Many farmers lost their land and had to find a new means to support themselves and their families. The factories and mills offered steady wages, something the agricultural industry could not (Glass 19).

Another important constituency at the mill was women. According to Lu Ann Jones, assistant professor of history at East Carolina University, women were among the first wave of workers into the factory, especially widowed women who found it hard to maintain a large farm.

Young women were often sent to the factories to earn extra money for their family. This by no means meant freedom for these women, who were still expected to live with another mill family (Jones). According to Frankel, “In the early decades, young women and children supplied the bulk of the laboring force...they comprised two thirds of the total work force” (32). Even marriage did not mean escape for women as they often ended up marrying within the mill community (Frankel 71). The strong moral code in American society at this time deemed that married women should stay at home to cook and clean. But the demand for more family income forced more and more women to take their place in the factory (Glass 46). There the women were confined to tasks such as spinners and winders with no room to improve their positions (Frankel 107). It seemed like work never ended for these women. Even after an eleven-hour day in the mill, they were still expected to come home to the family chores (104). Later, more and more entire families began to seek work at the mills.

Mill owners, in an attempt to supervise all aspects of their workers lives, constructed towns near the factory specifically for their workers (O’Quinlivan 11). The industrial part of these towns and the surrounding houses were know as the mill village, and were often separated from the actual town. Rocky Mount, North Carolina was one of these mill towns. The town we know of today was actually two towns: Rocky Mount Mills, where the actual factory and its workers were located and the adjoining Rocky Mount, where the middle and upper classes resided, including the mill owners and their families (O’Quinlivan 11).

The main textile mill was surrounded by various other smaller mills and warehouses, all owned by the same company (Glass 17). The Avalon mill in Madison, N.C., is a good example of a mill village. According to Vera Dillon “within the village were found small frame houses, a mill store, a barber shop, a boarding house, an ice cream parlor, and a Mormon

church...approximately sixty houses” and a small school above the store (12). Mill owners controlled every aspect of their workers’ lives.

Some of the smaller mill villages did not have local governments, hospitals, fire, or police departments. The mill superintendent was in charge of managing both the factory and in the town (Dillon 15). The mercantile stores were stocked and owned by the mill owner. If workers did not agree with prices, there were no alternatives on where to shop. The owner even hired local ministers, instructing them to preach on the values of hard work (Jones).

As the mill villages began to grow, local carpenters were hired by the mill owner to construct houses, which were rented to the workers (Jones). Small, four-bedroom farmhouses were built close to the mill so the workers could walk to work each day. The owners set the rent at “fifty cents to a dollar per room” and required that the “mill family must provide one worker per room or two workers per three rooms” (Glass 18). This meant that most of the family was expected to work in the mill, which they usually did. Even as they began a new way of life, mill workers tried to maintain their rural life in the villages by tending small gardens, and raising chickens and livestock (Hall et al).

The emergence of the family work system had mothers, fathers and children working side by side in the factories. In his research on Alexander County, N.C., Watt found an entire family that worked in the mill. The father, Able Fox, worked in the mill with his four daughters: Cora, age 10, Ida, 12, Annie, 14 and Alice, 19 (53). In the Lewis Hine photograph “Learning to Spin” a woman stands at a large piece of machinery with her small daughter working next to her (Hall et al 65). Working families were a familiar occurrence in mills.

Mill owners eagerly used children as workers. Some children helped their parents in the factory until they themselves were old enough to be hired (Frankel 51). Children were a ready source of cheap labor. They learned new skills quickly and their small hands were good for reaching into the machines to dislodge jammed equipment (Glass 52).

Before taking their place at the machines, children of mill workers attended school for a brief time. Schools in the mill villages had classes only to the eighth grade. The schoolhouses themselves resembled factories often containing one large room holding several classes at once (Veto 34). A photograph of a mill school classroom by Hine shows a room with sparse furniture with only desks and a black board (Hall et al 12). The children were taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic, with the higher grades offering a foreign language (Veto 84). Ironically mill villages had the best teachers available because mill owners paid them so well (28). A mill town in Cherryville, N.C., had one schoolhouse for 364 students and nine teachers (98). The salary for the teachers was \$208 per year. In Roanoke Rapids teachers were paid \$292 per year (131). Compared to \$1,000 a year made by a family of factory workers, this does not seem like much. Teachers were usually unmarried and had no children so they only had to support themselves.

Another photograph by Lewis Hine is one of mill workers in Bynum, N.C., dressed in baseball outfits with their coach, the mill owner, standing prominently next to them (Hall et al). Workers would often get frustrated with conditions at the mills and seek employment elsewhere. In order to keep workers at their mills, the owners provided leisure time with recreational opportunities. Events such as “sewing clubs, garden clubs, flower and fashion shows, cooking schools and baseball teams” were set up in an attempt to appease workers (Glass 54). In another Hine picture, a room full of boys participate in “organized recreation.” Mill owners hoped to

“build strong bodies and disciplined minds” in an attempt to create a more productive worker (Hall et al 138). In the mill village of Avalon, even religion was a scheduled event, as Dillon writes “Sunday school was held every Sunday and church service every other Sunday night” (20). Picnics were also held, giving the mill families another reason to get together (18).

The entire mill village community was an important aspect of workers’ life. As Glass points out, “the unique bonds of mill village life were necessary strategies to deal with the grinding poverty faced by all textile workers” (47). By the 1920s, mill workers had developed their own type of country or “hillbilly” music (67). Mill owners saw themselves as the patriarch of one large family, helpless without them. But this was not the view of the mill workers, who tried to distance themselves from the “give and take” hand of the mill owner by relying upon each other for aid and support (Jones). The many harsh aspects of mill life could otherwise break a person’s spirit.

One of the most poignant photographs by Hine, titled “Doffers at the Bib Mill No. 1,” shows a little boy not more than eight years old, standing barefoot on top of a dangerous machine (Hall et al). Mill equipment had no safety features and could easily dismember or maim a worker (Jones). Working conditions in the mills were harsh and depressing. The actual work was “tedious, repetitive, noisy, and sometimes dangerous” (Glass 48). The factories had no ventilation, leaving the rooms hot and humid (Jones). Unbeknownst to the workers, cotton dust produced a lung disease known as byssinosis, not formally recognized until the 1960s (Glass 93). Fire was a constant threat. Most early factories were made of wood and fires spread quickly. There were not enough measures taken to extinguish the huge blazes (Glass 16).

Gripping poverty caused many problems for families. Though families would spend a large part of their income on food, it would not be enough to ensure a proper diet (Fee 1641). Pellagra, caused by inadequate protein and vitamins, reached epidemic proportions (Hall et al). According to the “American Journal of Epistemology” poverty can result in illness due to the “accumulation of filth, insanitary toilets,” overcrowding, and poor ventilation. Factory and mill workers were often the victims of tuberculosis (1614). For all this, workers received barely \$1,000 a year, working twelve hours a day, for five and a half days a week (Glass 47).

Overall “the mill village itself...remained best known for the poverty of its residents...Its housing, sanitation, streets, and educational institutions were substandard” (Glass 65). These problems caused an obvious conflict between workers and management, which could often lead to strikes within the mill community (Glass 20).

Strikes and protests in the Southern mills were far outnumbered by those in the North. This may relate to the Southern workers’ farming backgrounds where hard work and twelve hour days were the norm. Nevertheless, there were several strikes in the South during the 1920’s and 30’s, the largest of which was the General Textile Strike of 1934. Mill owners and governors often called in the National Guard to suppress the strikers (Hall et al 335).

Reformers and activists tried to bring the workers’ plight to the attention of the middle class public, who might have otherwise been oblivious to it. Perhaps the most compelling evidences against child labor were the photographs of Lewis Hine. Yet, it was not until 1938 that the federal government prohibited child labor.

Surprisingly, mill workers resented interference by reformers. Workers believed their children had to work so the family could afford to eat. Jones makes the point that rather than

child labor reform, it was the underlying problem of poverty that should have been addressed by activists. Legislation was passed in the 1930s to reduce hours, set minimum wages, and improve working conditions in all industries (Glass 84).

Perhaps it was the growth of technology that changed mill life. After the first world war the industry began a rigorous “better equipment campaign” aimed at cutting costs and improving equipment. This meant decreasing wages and workers (Glass 62). A goal of the 1920s–30s became “eliminating the human element as a cost factor” (59). New technology and equipment meant that fewer workers were needed to operate the machines (82). With fewer workers and child labor laws in effect, owners no longer felt the need to maintain the mill village (84). The houses, schools, churches, and stores were sold. Finally, “after 1940 the true mill village essentially ceased to exist” (Veto 125).

As remnants of the past, many old mills stand empty and abandoned, scattered throughout the South. Local people barely notice them in their daily lives. Some mills have been remodeled and turned into quaint shopping centers like the Carr Mill Mall in Carrboro, N.C. Some mills fall into ruin from neglect and indifference. Either way, these mills surviving today are monuments to the American workers of the 1900s.

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