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Farm and Factory Struggles [1]

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Farm and Factory Struggles in the 1920s

by RoAnn Bishop
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By the 1920s, North Carolina had become the nation's largest producer of cotton textiles and the leading industrial state in the Southeast. At the same time, it boasted more farms than every state besides Texas. But despite the appearance of prosperity during this period, Tar Heel farmers and factory workers both struggled to make a living.

The demand for cotton during World War I [2] (1914–1918) triggered an overproduction of the commodity, which led to an agricultural depression during the 1920s. About the same time that farmers' cotton prices fell, cotton mill owners hired experts to think of ways to make their mills more efficient. The result was that some millworkers lost their jobs, while those who remained were required to work faster and harder for the same amount of pay.

Disgruntled by the new production standards, as well as their long hours, low wages, and unhealthy working conditions, some millworkers joined labor unions and went on strike to demand improvements.

For some farmers, the boll weevil [3] infestation that ruined cotton crops during the 1920s was the final straw. They simply left their fields to go to work in the mills, where they at least could count on a regular income.

Thousands of African Americans had begun to leave North Carolina during World War I to search for better lives in northern industrial cities. Plagued by racial discrimination, low wages, and inferior schools and housing here, as well as in other southern states, they fled to northern urban centers, where wages were higher and the war had created a great demand for labor. This mass exodus, called the Great Migration [4], continued up to the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement began to promise better opportunities and living conditions for African Americans in the South.

Despite the dramatic expansion of industry and the steady growth of towns and cities [5] in North Carolina during the 1920s, most Tar Heels clung to their rural roots and continued to farm. In general, farmers of this period labored much as they had since the end of the Civil War. They still raised corn, sweet potatoes, and peanuts—the state's major food crops—and produced cotton and tobacco—its major cash crops.

Farm family members still worked together to tend the land. Most women did all the regular household chores and also worked in the field or barn alongside their husbands. Children started working on the farm when they were about six or seven years old, and most were made a "hand"—meaning they could carry the load of an adult farmworker—by the age of eleven or twelve. Days could start as early as 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. and end after dark. Every day but Sunday was a workday.

And while new time- and labor-saving machines, such as tractors, grain drills, reapers, and threshers, were becoming available in some parts of the state during the 1920s, most farmers didn't have the money to buy them. They made do with a few hand tools, a plow, and either a horse or a mule to pull it.

Many Tar Heel farmers did not own the land they farmed. One-third of white farmers and two-thirds of black farmers were tenant farmers or sharecroppers [6]. They rented farmland and a house from a landowner, paying either with cash or part of the harvest of a cash crop, such as cotton or tobacco. Sharecroppers also had to rent farm equipment and supplies. Few raised any livestock, and many did not grow their own food. Instead, they bought everything they needed on credit from the local "furnishing merchant" and hoped they could pay for it when their crops were sold. But many farmers, particularly tenant farmers and "croppers," were falling into debt and staying there. For some, the manufacture and sale of illicit whiskey, often called "moonshine," became their mainstay during this period of Prohibition [7].

Most tenants and sharecroppers—even farmers in general—lived in unpainted frame houses without benefit of running water, a telephone, or a car. Very few had a sanitary privy, or outhouse. Almost none had electricity. Because of disease, malnourishment, and poor health care, nearly one infant in four was stillborn or died before age six. Most farm children were finished with their formal education by the end of the fifth or sixth grade. Among tenants, nearly 10 percent could not read or write. And few sharecroppers belonged to a church, because they could neither read the hymns nor contribute to the offering plate.

While life in a mill village [8] was perhaps more comfortable than life on a farm during the 1920s, the work inside the cotton mill certainly was no easier. Wages were so low that usually the entire family, including children, had to work so they could afford to eat. Rather than the sun, steam whistles and time clocks kept track of the always-long workday—usually ten to twelve hours, six or six and a half days a week.

Although many millworkers were former farmhands who were used to hard work, nothing prepared them for the clouds of cotton dust that hung in the mill's spinning room or the intense, humid heat needed to keep the cotton fibers from breaking. Noise created by machinery in the spinning and weaving rooms was quite literally deafening, and the machines themselves were dangerous. Injuries were frequent.

For most millworkers, however, receiving steady wages and the chance to live in a mill village and run a charge account at the company store outweighed the disadvantages of working inside the mills. Because the earliest cotton mills in North Carolina needed water-powered machinery, they were located on fast-flowing rivers in the Piedmont region, often in remote rural areas. To lure and keep workers in these areas, mill owners began providing housing and other facilities, such as schools, churches, and a company store. Soon a village had appeared. And inside the village, residents became closely knit, like members of an extended family.

Rents stayed low, and lots were usually large enough to allow families to grow a garden. By the 1920s, most mill houses had electric lights, something rarely found on even the most prosperous farms at that time. Some mill owners even began to invest in health programs, recreational buildings, and company softball and baseball teams for their workers.

But these perks came with a price. By providing for most of the needs of mill workers and their families, mill owners maintained control over their private, as well as their work, lives. They expected total loyalty, and any efforts to the contrary could cost the worker not only his job but the jobs of his entire family, as well as their home.

By the 1920s, wage cuts and increased work demands had caused several strikes across North Carolina, nearly all of which failed to meet workers' demands. Then in 1928, the National Textile Workers Union organized a union in the Loray textile mill in Gastonia [9]. On March 30, 1929, after five mill employees were fired for being members of the Communist Party, two hundred workers walked off the job in protest. Soon employees at five other mills became involved in the dispute, and about a thousand workers were on strike. The National Guard [10] was sent out to break up the strike, but the situation turned violent in June 1929, when the local police chief was shot and killed during a raid on the strikers' tent city. More violence followed in September when Ella May Wiggins [11], a millworker and union organizer, was shot and killed on her way to a union rally.

Strikes continued in the state's textile mills during the 1930s, but few were successful. Not until after World War II did conditions in the mills significantly improve. By that time, mill villages already had begun to pass into history. As for tenant farmers and sharecroppers, it would take a combination of agricultural research and outreach services, mechanization, and the New Deal programs of the Great Depression to improve their lives.

At the time of this article's publication, RoAnn Bishop worked as an associate curator at the North Carolina Museum of History.

Educator Resources:

Agriculture and Textiles Lesson Plan [12], State Archives of North Carolina

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