

Spikes, Ardathy: Somewhere like DuPont ^[1]

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Ardathy Spikes: Somewhere like DuPont

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/8/2005. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

One of my favorite historians, Lu Ann Jones, recently showed me an oral history interview so interesting that I just can't resist sharing it, with her permission. It's the story of Ardathy Spikes, a woman in Grifton, in Pitt County. Lu Ann met Spikes while doing research for a book on the state's transition from farm to factory after World War II. Her book's focus is DuPont's giant facility outside of Kinston, where Spikes worked for 36 years.

When it opened in 1953, DuPont was the world's first commercial polyester plant. Its product, Dacron polyester, seemed a godsend. Dacron made possible the first "wash and wear" clothes, saving mostly the nation's women hours of ironing or pressing every week. Here in North Carolina, DuPont meant even more: As the farm economy crumbled, thousands of rural people like Spikes looked to the Kinston plant for a better life.

The company recently sold its Kinston facility, and now, after tremendous lay-offs, only a couple hundred people work at the plant. But for half a century, DuPont was part of the region's lifeblood.

Here Spikes tells Lu Ann what it was like taking that first job off the farm.



Ardathy Spikes. Photo by Juli Leonard, 2005. To request permission for further use, contact the News & Observer.

"I never thought that I'd wind up at somewhere like DuPont. I didn't have any education or training for any kind of job except working on the farm. I mean, I could drive a mule and I could drive a tractor and I could change the oil in a vehicle. But I was born in Craven County in 1939. My dad died when I was 2. My mom wound up with four children with no dad, so she raised us the best way she could. I had an older brother. To me, he was like my dad. If he told me to do something, I did it. I graduated out here at Grifton High School. I really wanted to go in the service because I felt like, growing up on the farm, that would be the only chance I'd have at a decent life. I knew I couldn't go to college.

I went out to DuPont with a schoolmate of mine. I went with her to put in an application. They asked me, "Why don't you put in one?" So I put in an application and figured that would be the end of it, you know.

They called me and it was in July, right in the middle of tobacco putting-in time. I asked my brother, I said, "Earl, do you want me to stay here and work with you, or do you want me to go to DuPont?" He says, "Well, you go ahead out there and see what you can do."

I started in 1957, July 1957. When I started, there was 3,200 people working out there. DuPont was the highest paying job around. I think it was a dollar and a half an hour, \$40 a week, something like that. DuPont had a savings-investment plan.

I still farmed just like I did before I started to work at DuPont. A lot of days, I'd get off work at eight o'clock in the morning and come home and drive a tractor until four or five o'clock in the afternoon, especially during tobacco putting-in time. If I had a tractor, I'd have a tractor.

My wages went to the family. To me, when I started working at DuPont, my money was just like their money. I didn't keep anything separate. As long as I stayed at home, when I got a paycheck, anybody says I need so and so, I went to the store. Most of my family still didn't have anything. Sharecropping, you didn't get a whole lot because you tended somebody else's land. It was not like it is now.

Working at DuPont was a wonderful experience. Of course, I had never been shut up in a place like that. When we went into work, we didn't know whether it was raining, snowing, hailing, or what outside. And I worked shift work for about 20 years.

The women's jobs, I always told them, was the hardest jobs. Well, I was the first girl to put in for a man's job. I told them that job, physically, is no ways as hard as what I was doing before. I was the only girl in about 60 or 70 boys. I enjoyed the work.

My buddies that worked with me, we used to -- in fact, we still do -- hang around a lot going fishing together. We sit down there on the creek dock talking about how we didn't think we'd ever amount to a hill of beans. But we did. I never thought I would not have retired when I did if they had not offered the early retirement. Both of my fishing buddies were retired, so I chose to go ahead and retire and keep them company. I was glad I did, because we got a chance to do some things.

Both of those guys had been to Alaska, and they kept talking about how we needed to go to Alaska and go fishing. I didn't really think we'd go, but one day we were down there at the creek and Everett told me, he said, "You owe Berk some money."

He said, "For a plane ticket." I said, "Where're we going?" He said, "We're going to Alaska."

I sold my DuPont stock and paid him for the plane ticket. We were gone 21 days and I caught a 150-pound halibut, big as I was. We had a ball. I really never thought I'd get a chance to do something like that growing up. I mean, it's just hard to believe.

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