

Primary Source: A Textile Mill Worker's Family ^[1]

Below is the transcript of the interview with Stella Wall from Wake Forest, N.C. Her interview was part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project started in 1935.

She was in the kitchen mopping her floor. Her ten year old son Dan scraped in the yard with his scrubby brush broom and threw out a remark now and then to the tiny calf in the shed near by. The two girls, seven and three, lay on a pallet in the living room and looked at the pictures in a second grade reader. The oldest one hopped up to a sitting position and turned in the direction of the kitchen. "Mama, here comes somebody," she said in low but excited tones. Stella Wall put down her mop and came forward to greet me. She apologized immediately for the slight disorder of the room. Every day after dinner the children took their seat on pallets spread on the floor, she explained, and it was usually four o'clock before she had them dressed and the house straight again.

The living room in which we sat contained a dresser, a center table, a sewing machine, a settee, and three chairs. Four Indian-bead center pieces edged with pink crochet dropped from the mantelpiece, and cloths of similar design covered the table and machine. The three windows were hung with clean, airy curtains which added a cheerful note to the room. A bright colored picture of Christ in the attitude of bestowing a blessing hung over the mantel and an even brighter colored group of Christ and three of the disciples occupied the center space of the opposite wall.

She long ago accepted with [equanimity](#) ^[2] the disrupted plans of her youth and had fashioned a pattern of living with what life had given her rather than what she had hoped it would give her. When she was a little girl she wanted to be a school teacher. As her school life progressed she had kept that end in view, and was determined not to stop until she had enough training to get a teacher's certificate. There were only three children in her family, and her father, James Crowder, had worked up to the position of overseer of the cardroom, which paid him a good wage.

Stella had finished the eighth grade when her father became ill with [tuberculosis](#) ^[3]. For twelve months he stayed in the [sanitorium](#) ^[4] at Southern Pines and used up completely the small sum he had saved. For several years after he returned home he was unable to work, and his children supported him with the money they earned in the mill.

Stella made friends with fellow workers older than herself who were, as she expresses it, "doing a lot of courtin'," and she too fell into the way of [courting](#) ^[5]. As a consequence she married Ben Wall when she was only sixteen. There had never been an opportunity for her to return to school and the inclination to do so did not last after she met Ben. However, she'd like to go back now and finish if it were possible for her to do it. She thinks that schools are getting better and she'd like particularly to have the courses in [home economics](#) ^[6].

Stella regrets to see mill girls leave school because they feel that they are looked down upon by their classmates. Why should anyone be ashamed of the fact that his father or mother is an honest worker, she wants to know. Wouldn't the world be in a fix if there were no cotton mills? Why should the people who run the mills and make the cloth for the world to use be made to feel that they are not as good as other people? She has never bowed her head in shame before anybody and she does not think her God would have her do so. If she happens to meet with a person inclined to look down upon her because of her life at the mill she feels sorry for that person and considers he just doesn't know any better.

Stella would feel ashamed if she had not put forth effort to make for herself and family the best possible living. She has worked in the mill when she could during the twelve years of her married life, and managed to buy the furniture which is in her house. Besides the living room she has two bedrooms and a kitchen. Each of the bedrooms is furnished with two beds and a dresser. The kitchen is equipped with an oilstove, a cabinet, a breakfast room suite, and a row of shelves. The shelves are filled with glass jars of fruit and vegetables which Stella has prepared for the winter.

She faces the winter with some concern, although she and Ben have done much to provide for it. During the summer they raised a garden which has served them well. In a hog pen near by they have two hogs which they hope will furnish them with enough meat. Out of Ben's weekly wage of \$10.80 Stella has bought fruit for canning to supplement the vegetables she has canned from her garden. But, helped as she will be by her store of food, she knows that Ben's wage cannot meet the actual needs of her family.

There will be school supplies to buy for the three school-age children, winter clothes, and coal. Out of each weeks wage fifty cents must go to Dr. Timberlake and one dollar must go for house rent. Stella says she knows all of it can't be figured in and she wonders why she keeps on figuring endlessly.

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