

Life in Textile Mill Villages ^[1]



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"Like a Family"

by James Leloudis

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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.

Mill owners 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 North Carolina 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 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 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 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 worker’s 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 Gerringer 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 [7].

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-hundredheaded 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.

At the time of this article’s publication, James Leloudis was a staff member of the Southern Oral History Program and doctoral candidate, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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