

# The Chatham Historical Journal

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## WORK AND CULTURE IN A PIEDMONT MILL VILLAGE

by Douglas DeNatale

*[Doug DeNatale, folklorist, was a research assistant for the Southern Oral History program at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1978 and 1979, conducting interviews with former textile workers and researching documentary sources. His master's thesis (UNC-CH, 1980), doctoral dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1985), several articles, and a forthcoming book deal with the study of the transformation of local culture in Piedmont North Carolina between 1870 and 1940 during the development of the south-eastern textile industry, analyzing in particular the mill village of Bynum, Chatham County.]*

In 1949, Barbara Chartier observed bemusedly of the workers in a South Carolina textile mill village: "They refer to the mills jokingly as the 'death hole' and the 'jail house,' but they make no attempt to find employment elsewhere."<sup>1</sup> While we can certainly respond to this by pointing to any number of factors which bound Southern mill workers to the mills, we continue to ask Chartier's implied question today: How can it be that mill workers accepted a restricted social setting and oppressive working conditions with so little overt protest?

Chartier and her fellow sociologists at the University of North Carolina found an answer in perceiving Southern cotton mill paternalism as a social system developed and regulated by management, which had produced a new "social type."<sup>2</sup> Under this interpretation of paternalism, workers had become "reserved," "non-aggressive," "pessimistic and fatalistic," with "a low level of aspiration."<sup>3</sup> Today, this sounds suspiciously like an inversion of the claims made by industrial boosters during the Cotton Mill Campaign.<sup>4</sup> Rather than representing workers as products to be molded, social critics portrayed them as products which had been deformed.

Attempts through oral history to gain the workers' perspective have hardly clarified the issue. While oral historical studies have rightly viewed workers as active participants in their own lives, they have offered little to challenge the image of workers as grist for management's mill. Mill workers often express dissatisfaction for mill work, but do not generally condemn mill life. This has led observers to radically different conclusions. In a recent Northern example, where Tamara Hareven saw strong family networks



Back row, left to right: Mr. G. E. Moore, Jeff Durham, Coy Durham, Carnie Abernathy, Briggs Atwater  
Front row, left to right: Talton Riggsbee, Clarence Andrews, John Tilman, Henry Abernathy, Will Andrews  
(Photograph courtesy of Sally Abernathy Fowler)

which mitigated industrial *anomie* among the Amoskeag textile workers, Alan Tractenberg saw in the same oral histories "evidence of how well the ideology succeeded in forcing on industrial workers an image of themselves as fundamentally helpless."<sup>5</sup>

Too often, writers have perceived paternalism as a single, overarching social system in the mill village which proceeded from management to workers. Focussing on the power which management possessed in prosecuting its ends, these have failed to fully account for workers' reactions. While the mill owner has been portrayed in an active role, establishing and maintaining a set of social controls in the mill village, the workers have been seen in a passive role, conforming to management demands with little protest. The oral evidence has been read in that light, rejected where it does not seem to tally. Yet we cannot reject workers' statements in this manner without either giving too much weight to the rose-colored-glasses theory of memory, or dehumanizing workers by dismissing their testimony on the grounds of indoctrination. I would like to suggest instead that the oral histories of Southern mill workers should not be read as the straightforward statements of a "social type," but interpreted as expressions of a particular culture that mill workers shared within a restricted social context. Further, I will suggest that while this culture could not obliterate the effects of paternalism, and in many



Alice Abernathy and her father Walter Farrell, at a family reunion about 1927.

(Photograph courtesy of Sally Abernathy Fowler)

enough to require specialists who treated diseases beyond the capability of the average community member. In Bynum, a Mrs. Ida Jane Smith served this role for many years. Her status is indicated by her position in regard to the doctor who also served the village. The two were regarded as partners, especially in the treatment of childhood diseases, but the villagers considered the doctor the junior partner: "She knew these old remedies better—I mean, at the time she was at it—than the doctor," reports one villager. "If you were sick, I guess [the doctor] just gave you sawdust, or alum, or something like that," remembers another.<sup>11</sup>

(This is the first part of a two-part article.)

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Chartier, "Weaverton: A Study of Culture and Personality in a Southern Mill Town," M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1949, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Jeannette P. Nichols, "Does the Mill Village Foster any Social Types?" *Social Forces* 2 (1923): 350-357; John Kenneth Morland, *Millways of Kent*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> Chartier, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Marjorie Potwin, *Cotton Mill People of the Piedmont*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), p. 29; Lois MacDonald, *Southern Mill Hills*. (New York: Alex L. Hillman, 1928), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Tamara Hareven, *Amoskeag*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 12; Alan Trachtenburg, "Machines Come to America," *New York Times Book Review*, January 21, 1979: 33.

<sup>6</sup> Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1921), pp. 170-171.

<sup>7</sup> Glenn Gilman, for example, wrote that the mill owner "had to protect them from their own ignorance until such a time as they were oriented to the new way of living." Glenn Gilman, *Human Relations in the Industrial Southeast*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> There is ample evidence for this in census records which list family members as both farm and mill workers, the practice of Bynum churchgoers of retaining membership in country chapels, numerous notes in the Chatham County newspaper of visits between farm and mill relatives, and entire families working for a period in the mill, returning to the farm for a period, and then coming back to the mill.

<sup>9</sup> Chartier reports, "Although such beliefs are gradually beginning to disappear, many mothers follow the almanac and wean their children when the sign is in the knee. Weaning at any other time would 'tear their bowels up.' The practice is widespread, even among mothers who refer to it as 'an old time superstition.'" Chartier, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> See Charles C. Hughes, "Medical Care: Ethnomedicine." In *Health and the Human Condition*. Michael H. Logan and Edward E. Hunt, Jr. eds. (North Scituate, MA: Duxbury Press, 1978), pp. 150-158; Loudell Snow, "Folk Medical Beliefs and their Implications for Care of Patients," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 81 (1974): 82f.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Frank Durham, September 10, 1979; Interview with Louise Harris, October 24, 1978.

Quite a number of our citizens, especially the young folks, went last night to the brick-yard, about half a mile from town, where bricks are being made for the new court-house, to see one of the kilns burning. They had begun to burn this kiln, containing 165,000 bricks, on last Monday so that by last night the flames were darting through all the crevices, bursting through the top and all the mass aglow with the heat, presenting quite a striking and picturesque scene, the lurid flames casting fantastic shadows on the surrounding forest, illuminating the darkness of the night, and the weird-like figures of the laborers throwing fuel into the "eyes" of the kiln, all combining to make one think of the regions below.

*Chatham Record*, August 25, 1881

[An article of November 3, 1881, reports that 600,000 bricks were used in building the courthouse.]



(Photograph courtesy of Grady Vestel)

The Vestel home was built by James Vestel in 1789. It passed to his children, who sold it to Oliver Vestel in 1845. Oliver Vestel gave it to his son, E.L. Vestel, the father of Grady Oliver Vestel, who lives in it today.

Mr. Jas. F. Elkins, who lives near here, has the champion cotton picking family in the county. On last Monday four of his children, the oldest seventeen and the youngest under ten, picked 973 pounds. His seventeen years old daughter, Miss Berta, picked 353 pounds herself.

*Siler City Grit*, September 29, 1909



Louise Jones, probably in the late 1920s.  
(*Photograph courtesy of Sally Abernathy Fowler*)

instances hampered the development of new responses, nonetheless it developed as a viable and understandable response to mill life. In order to explore this, I would like to briefly discuss several aspects of culture in one Piedmont mill village.

For the past four years,\* the Southern Oral History Program of the University of North Carolina conducted interviews in Bynum, North Carolina, as part of a larger study of industrialization in the Carolina Piedmont. Bynum, located in central Chatham County, was founded by two brothers of the Bynum family in 1872. In 1886, the mill and village were sold to the J. M. Odell Manufacturing Company of Concord, North Carolina. In 1901, the mill was placed under the management of Captain W. L. London, a merchant in Pittsboro, the Chatham County seat. London selected a young man from Bynum to become superintendent of the mill, preening him for the job by setting him to learn the various tasks in the mill. The new superintendent held the position from 1904 until 1955, with one seven-year hiatus. In time, a management hierarchy developed in Bynum, with many of the middle management personnel members of the same family. Bynum interviews reveal many management practices which were manipulative. Incidents involving excessive drinking outside the mill, for example, were handled by sentencing the offending worker to church attendance. Disciplinary action was taken by the superintendent, who used family networks in Bynum to gain information and exert pressure. Such pressure was brought to bear on a hesitant unionization attempt in the 1930s, with predictably effective results. In addition, the middle management was not above using their position for self-interest. At least one overseer was known for "pawning time" — lending money at extortionary interest and deducting the amount from workers' paychecks. Nonetheless, the Bynum villagers interviewed emphasize a feeling of harmony and cooperation in the village. In my involvement as a folklorist with the people of Bynum, I have sought to explore their cultural life in relation to this social backdrop.

Though it seems odd, I must first assert that Bynum villagers did, in fact, have an indigenous culture

\*This article was written in 1980.

which formed a continuum with their rural past. So much emphasis has been placed on the paternalistic relationship that mill workers have been portrayed as a people torn out of context. As Broadus Mitchell put it, "Sometimes the people brought with them little besides bad habits and a total dependence upon the management for moral care and physical upbuilding."<sup>6</sup> This perception, in one form or another, has persisted.<sup>7</sup> While the failed tenant farm families who came to the mills often bore a deep sense of defeat, they did not leave their cultural identity behind. As new family networks developed among the core of workers who settled in the village, social and family ties with the surrounding countryside were maintained. Bynum mill families continued to attend and be buried at country churches, attend seasonal rural celebrations, bring in farm relatives as boarders, move back and forth between the mill and farm as conditions permitted, and divide their children as laborers between the two.<sup>8</sup> Rural practices were not lost, but were carried into the village and modified to the new life.

As one example of this carryover, I will quickly point to the practice of medicine in the village. When noted by sociologists and social workers, folk medical beliefs in Southern mill villages were dismissed as superstitious lingerings without recognizing the articulate system of practice behind them.<sup>9</sup> These beliefs relied on a philosophy of causality linking diverse elements, and contained threads of outmoded, once conventional systems.<sup>10</sup> Folk medicine was complex



Bynum in the 1930s.  
(*Photograph courtesy of Sally Abernathy Fowler*)

The *Chatham Historical Journal* is an occasional publication of the Chatham County Historical Association. Its purpose is to disseminate items of historical interest about Chatham County. Material, which should be previously unpublished, may include photographs, private papers, church or organization records, monographs, or letters. Items should be of reasonable length and should include source(s) of research material.

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(Photograph courtesy of Wade Hadley)

The Snow Camp Foundry dam was built by Jesse Dixon and others. It stands today just west of FSA road 1004, approximately three miles north of the Chatham County line. The well-dressed young ladies are Clara Dixon, Nora Dixon, Annie Armitage, Mary N. Henley, and Eula Dixon. The photograph was made before the year 1904, as one of the young ladies in it was married on February 14 of that year.

The photograph was made available by John David Hadley of Summerfield, N.C., whose grandmother was Mary N. Henley, who later married A.F. Hadley.

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## GROWING UP IN CHATHAM COUNTY

*[The following narrative was taken from a taped interview of Ruth Waddell Horton on August 9, 1981. The tape is on file in the Pittsboro Memorial Library. Persons interested in making taped interviews of Chatham County people may write or call the secretary of the Association to request tapes and use of the tape recorder.]*

I can't remember a whole lot of bad things. I can remember being pestered by flies, because the barn was right at the house. I can't remember whether we had screens or not, but when mealtime would come, my momma would always tell us to go out and break branches off the trees and we'd get all the flies out of the kitchen or wherever they came in. And we'd have those long things swinging from the ceiling that would zoom, catch the flies. And when we'd hear about bad things happening, they'd always be way off.

There's one incident that I can remember that I think will always stick out in my mind as a sore spot. I must have been maybe ten years old. My mom would have dresses made. I can't even remember who did the sewing but on this particular occasion we were getting ready to go back to Homecoming in Randolph County. I think my dress was pink. It was organdy, with all kinds of ruffles. Socks to match. Shiny patent-leather black shoes. We got dressed maybe thirty minutes to an hour before we'd get ready to go. My mom said, "O.K., now you all sit down and stay clean." I thought I was *clean* — I was clean — and standing in front of the mirror and turning — thisaway — I mean, I was proud of me! I was just looking up one side and down the other. So I got up — I don't know, a drink of water — and went

around a corner of the table. There was a nail sticking out. Rrrrush! Well, my Sunday was ruined. I'd rather tore my meat. Tore my pretty dress. It was rough. They sewed it up, but my God! my whole day was ruined. Well, as far as I was concerned, they could have not even sewed it up.

My momma held the iron' hand. Even when I was fifteen years old, I can remember my momma used to go with us. We had fellas coming in, taking us to the movie. My momma would go, too. She said we weren't quite old enough to be turned loose. When we were eighteen, we were supposed to be grown. But then, if you were going to the movie — "If I can't go, you can't go." Well, there might have been sometimes when she didn't go. But if there was a good movie showing and if it was the type of boy — we didn't have one set of boys, we had more than one set that would come — and she didn't think they were too competent, she would go.

I can remember when we used to go to the junior-senior prom. That was always nice. It started when I was a sophomore. Somebody out of the senior class invited me and I felt, "Mm, here I am a sophomore and going to the junior-senior prom." And then when I became a junior I could go, a senior I could go, and then the year after. Back in those days you could go two or three years after you graduated. They were formal. We'd always get a new dress. Maybe if I got a new dress my junior year, I wouldn't want to wear it my senior year. But I can remember a couple of times that I borrowed a dress, just so it would be different, you know.