

Jacksonville State University

A study of "Life in the Mill Village"

Department of History

Dr. Jackson

History 442

By

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Ft. Payne, AL

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2 interviews

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## Life in the Mill Village

Prior to the Civil War industrialization in the South progressed very slowly. Although, some pioneers like Daniel Pratt from Alabama ran mills in the 1840's and 1850's industry did not seem to "take off" until around 1880.(1) After the Civil War many people turned to sharecropping and tenant farming, thus retarding the growth of industry. "If we are to understand the South since 1865, we have to understand the southern textile industry and its characteristics." A "boom" in the textile industry took place in the years from 1880-1905.(2) Industry continued to grow through the years and by the year 1900 more than 500,000 southerners worked in manufacturing and about 100,000 thousand of these workers worked in textile mills.(3) Cotton mills seemed to be the more prosperous industry in the South by 1900.(4) Among those who worked in these mills were my Great Grandfather, his sons, his daughter and his son-in-law.

As the new century reached only its tenth year farmland was rising in value. Many farmers who had once owned land

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(1)Wayne Flynt, Poor But Proud (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 93.

(2)W.J. Cooper and T.E. Terrill, The American South, A History (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1991), 562.

(3)same as footnote # 2

(4)same as footnote # 2

(5)same as footnote # 2

found themselves turning to sharecropping and tenant farming. The average farm had decreased from 321 acres in 1860 to 84 acres in 1910.(5) Many farmers sought a way to "better" their situations. They turned to the mills for the promise of a better and more secure future. For my family and many other southerners the textile industry brought them off the farms, to the cities, and provided a more stable way of making a living. As these people came to the mills, communities were created. These communities came to be called "Mill Villages". They were made up of mostly mill workers living in mill-owned houses built around the mill. "The company owned village has been a conspicuous adjunct of the cotton mill whenever and wherever the branch of textiles has sprung up".(6)

Many people, like my grandmother, were reared in the mill village, married, and reared there own families in that same community. Many people spent their entire lives in the village. An institution was created well worthy of study. My Grandfather was also a mill worker. Unlike my grandmother he came from the background of a small farmer. He met my grandmother as a result of working in the mill and chose to marry and raise his family in that small community of mill

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(5)W.J. Cooper and T.E. Terrill, The American South, A History (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1991), 562.

(6)Harriet L. Herring, Passing of the Mill Village (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 3.

workers. I chose to interview my Grandfather, Grandmother and my mother on "Life in the Mill Village". I do not think reading a book could allow one to understand what life was like in the mill village quite like an interview with someone who lived and still lives there.

Starting in the 1920's my Great Grandfather, Clifford Kendall Williamson, began working for the cotton mill in Manchester, Georgia. He was the mill carpenter and his job consisted mostly of repairing the mill houses and the mill. Later in the twenty's he decided to open a store in Manchester in which he catered to many of the mill workers. Many of his customers traded on credit and when the stock market crashed in 1929 most were unable to pay their debts. The Depression hurt the textile industry and drove some out of business.(7) Clifford and his family lost almost everything but they did have a place to turn. He and his family moved to Alabama City, Alabama and he and two of his sons worked in the Dwight Cotton Mill. Soon they moved to Albertville where Clifford and his sons began working in the Saratoga Victory Cotton Mill. They took up residence in the mill village and started a new life. Clifford was again the mill carpenter intrusted with the upkeep of the forty sum odd mill houses, owned by the mill, and the mill itself. His

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(7)Wayne Flynt, Poor But Proud (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 94.

sons eventually ascended to well paying jobs in the mill, one as an overseer and one as a loom fixer. Clifford lived out the rest of his life in the village.

My grandmother, Nita Maude Williamson Stevens, has spoken fondly about life in Manchester. She says they "had it pretty good", a house, a car, etc. but she also speaks fondly of life in the Saratoga Mill Village.(8) Although her father lost nearly everything, they had a place to go. Just like many other Southerners of the time the mill was a stable way to make a living. "Most mill workers were rural whites who gave up the uneven struggle on the land for the regularity of life and salary in the mill town".(9) The wages were not the "highest in the world" but they did have a house and food on the table. Although the wages in Alabama were the lowest in the South the average mill worker made about 700 dollars per year as opposed to 410 dollars for the average farm laborer.(10) My grandmother recalls that her father, since he was the mill carpenter, could look in on them during the day. She speaks of "good times".(11)

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(8) Oral History with Nita Maude Williamson Stevens

(9) Wayne Flynt, Poor But Proud (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 95.

(10) W.W. Rogers, R.D. Ward, L.R. Atkins, and W. Flynt, Alabama, The History of a Deep South State (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 482.

(11) same as footnote # 8

The mill village in Albertville had many conveniences before the people of the town. Some examples of these were electricity, street lights and a sewer system.(12) In the Saratoga Village she says that they had electricity and a sewer system before anyone in Albertville. When my grandmother was old enough she worked in the mill for about a year before she met my Grandfather, Frank Marvin Stevens. When World War II started and my grandfather was called to fight she again worked in the mill, first on a call-in basis but later full-time. She says that she enjoyed working and really did not want to stop but it was necessary for her to raise her family. She explains that the majority of the workers during the war and probably before, were women.(13) Southern mills did not begin to see a male majority in their workforce until after 1910.(14) The mill needed workers and many women took jobs in the mill while their husbands were away. My grandmother never went back to working in the mill but she recalls fondly the days she did.

Interviewing my grandfather about mill life was very enlightening. He should be one of the foremost experts in the field. He began working for the mill in 1935 and for a

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(12) Oral History with Nita Maude Williamson Stevens

(13) same as footnote # 12

(14) Wayne Flynt, The American South, A History (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1991), 95.

time was classified as a "learner". This meant that he was learning his job and consequently, for my grandfather, he was not paid to learn. He was a young man, fresh off the farm, working in the industry that characterized the "New South". Eventually he learned his trade of loom fixer and, according to my grandfather, this was one of the better jobs in the mill. When he began work at the mill it was owned by Saratoga Victory Mills of Boston, Massachusetts and later the Kendall Corporation took over. He went on to explain that Saratoga located this mill in the South for three reasons. The first was an abundance of laborers, second because they did not have to pay the laborers high wages and thirdly to avoid labor unions in the mill.(15) Most textile workers were machine tenders and did not require many already learned skills. Saratoga drew workers from the field, to the factory, paid them more than they could make on the farm and provided them with low rent housing. My grandfather started off in the 30's making between fifty and fifty-five cents per hour. Saratoga did have a union in the early 30's but it folded. By 1949, though the AFL-CIO had taken hold.

Southern mills were almost totally segregated.(16) My grandfather said that the only blacks he remembered in the

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(15) Oral History with Frank Marvin Stevens

(16) W.J. Cooper and T.E. Terrill. The American South, A History (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1991), 497.

mill cleaned the bathrooms and the work areas, he never remembers one working in the mill itself.(17)

In many cases the mill helped finance outside activities for its workers. They helped finance churches, and schools. They did not interfere but they did help out. For recreation the Saratoga mill provided a ball field and sponsored a baseball team. Many other mills in the South had baseball teams and some had basketball teams.(18) My grandfather can recall workers being hired because they played baseball well. The team played other mills in the surrounding area. Mills from Guntersville, Huntsville, and Birmingham were among their opponents.

My grandfather told me that he started working in the mill because "he had no other place to go". I think he was probably not so different from many other Southern Americans of the time. He explained that, "life was good and my life was good, I worked hard and eventually moved up to one of the best paying jobs except in the managerial field".(19) My grandfather is a proud man just like many other southerners of his generation. He does not fit in the category of the down-trodden mill worker as Ben Robertson of South Carolina

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(17)Oral History with Frank Marvin Stevens

(18)W.W. Rogers, R.D. Ward, L.R. Atkins, and W. Flynt, Alabama, A History of a Deep South State (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 563.

(19)same as footnote # 17



remembers them, Looking at their faces, the result of working indoors all the time, he felt that "they had been captured, that they were imprisoned, that they had given up being free".(20) My grandfather does not fit this characterization, he was and is a proud, upright man who just happened to work in a mill. He was born into a world of transition and he made the best out of it he could. I think he did very well.

I interviewed my grandparents separately to gain some insight into how men's and women's roles were different in the village. I now will write of them together. The fact that my grandfather worked in the mill was primarily the reason they were able to meet. They were married in 1939 but did not move in the village immediately. My grandfather had been living at home and walking to work. When they married they lived in town until after the war and when he came back they took up residence in the mill village on the corner of first street. The house they moved in was a typical four room mill house. It had two bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen, den and two fireplaces all condensed in a small house. My grandfather explained that when they took the house rent was charged by the room, approximately 25 cents per room. I have found entries of rent in Huntsville's Merrimack and Dallas

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(20)W.J. Cooper and T.E. Terrill. The American South, A History (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1991), 561.

mills of rent up to one dollar per room per month.(21) This was taken directly out of their pay.

My grandparents raised four children in that house, among one of those was my mother, Peggy Stevens Byrd. She was born into the village in 1952. She recalls life fondly and looks back and is glad she grew up there. She says that they did not have the biggest house or the fanciest car but they did get by, "I respect my father for the hard work he did for his family". My grandfather is like so many other Southerners of the time that used the mills to advance their respective situations.

Although he never complained of working in the mill he did not want his children working there. He wanted them to go to college and make a "better" life for themselves. He did not want them to have to work as hard as he did. His and my grandmothers's influence did pay off, all of his children went to college and all are now teachers or administrators in Alabama Public Schools.

My grandfather retired in 1981 after 45 years. He and my grandmother still live in that same house and in the same community where they met more than fifty years ago.

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(21)Wayne Flynt, Poor But Proud (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 100.

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- Oral History with Nita Maude Williamson Stevens
- Oral History with Frank Marvin Stevens
- Oral History with Peggy Sue Stevens Byrd



**Gift and Release Agreement:**

We Frank & Nita Maude Stevens and Charles Shane Byrd  
(Interviewee, print) (Interviewer, print)

do hereby give and grant to Jacksonville State University, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at The home of Frank & Nita Maude in Albertville, AL on the date(s) of March 7, 1995 for the oral history collection being compiled by the Jacksonville State University Library.

Frank Stevens  
Nita Maude Stevens  
(Interviewee's signature)

Address 1st St.  
Albertville, AL 35950  
Phone 878-0574

Date 03/07/95

Charles Shane Byrd  
(Interviewer's signature)

Address P.O. Box 1346  
FT. Payne AL 35967  
Phone 845-6163

Date 03/07/95

Gift and Release Agreement

We Peggy Sue Stevens Byrd and Charles Shane Byrd  
Interviewee (print) Interviewer (print)

do hereby give and grant to Dr. Suzanne Marshall, Assistant Professor of History, Jacksonville State University, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at

The home of Peggy Byrd

on the date(s) of 03/07/95

for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

Peggy S. Byrd

Interviewee's signature

Address P.O. BOX 1346  
FT. Payne, AL 35967  
Phone 845-6163

Date 03/07/95

Charles Shane Byrd

Interviewer's signature

Address PO BX 1346  
FT. Payne, AL 35967  
Phone 845-6163

Date 03/07/95

**Interviewee Background Information**

Name: Frank Marvin Stevens

Address: 1st Street, Albertville, AL 35950

Phone Number(s): 878-0574

Approximate age or date of birth: 01/18/17

Mother's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Father's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Places lived and when: Born in Cleburne County and moved to Marshall County.

Education: 6<sup>th</sup> grade

Religion: Methodist

Business, political and social memberships (past and present): \_\_\_\_\_

Present occupation: retired

Former occupation(s): Loom fixer, Kendall Mills

Special skills: \_\_\_\_\_

Major Accomplishments: \_\_\_\_\_

Local events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

National events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

International events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

Natural born U.S. citizen? Yes/No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Country from which you emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: \_\_\_\_\_

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewee Background Information**

Name: Nita Maudie Stevens  
Address: 1st St., Albertville, AL 35950  
Phone Number(s): 878-6574  
Approximate age or date of birth: 01/20/19  
Mother's name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Father's name: Clifford Kendall Williamson  
Places lived and when: Manchester, GA., Albertville, AL

Education: \_\_\_\_\_

Religion: Methodist  
Business, political and social memberships (past and present): \_\_\_\_\_

Present occupation: retired  
Former occupation(s): house wife

Special skills: \_\_\_\_\_  
Major Accomplishments: \_\_\_\_\_

Local events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

National events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

International events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

Natural born U.S. citizen?  Yes  No  
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Country from which you emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_  
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: \_\_\_\_\_

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



**Interviewee Background Information**

Name: Peggy Sue Byrd  
Address: PO BX 1346 FT. Payne, AL  
Phone Number(s): 845-6163  
Approximate age or date of birth: 11/04/52  
Mother's name: Nita Mauda Stevens  
Father's name: Frank Marvin Stevens  
Places lived and when: Albertville, AL, FT. Payne, AL.

Education: Highschool, College (M.A.)

Religion: Methodist  
Business, political and social memberships (past and present): \_\_\_\_\_

Present occupation: Teacher  
Former occupation(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Special skills: \_\_\_\_\_  
Major Accomplishments: \_\_\_\_\_

Local events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

National events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

International events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

Natural born U.S. citizen? (Yes) No  
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Country from which you emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_  
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: \_\_\_\_\_

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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BYB  
- Shane Byrd

## Interview Questions

\*\*\*Frank Marvin Stevens

1. When did you start working in the mill?
2. What was your job?
3. What did you make (money) when you started?
4. Did you grow up on a farm?
5. Where was the mill based?
6. Why did they have mills in the south?
7. What year did Saratoga start having a union?
8. Did the mill provide housing?
9. How were you paid?
10. Were there any black people working in the mill?
11. Did the mill own a store?
12. Was there any women working in the mill?
13. Was there any children working in the mill?
14. Did the mill have a doctor?
15. Did they help build churches, schools, etc.?
16. What did you do for recreation?
17. How long did you work in the mill?
18. Did you meet you wife in the mill village?
19. Where did you live when you started working in the mill?
20. Why did you come to the mill?
21. Did you get your job back when you returned from the war?
22. Can you tell me anything else about life in the mill village?

## Interview Questions

\*\*\*Nita Maude Stevens

1. Where were you born?
2. What did your father do for a living?
3. Can you tell me about life in the Manchester mill village?
4. When did your father buy the store?
5. What happened when the Great Depression hit?
6. Where did you move to?
7. What did your father do there?
8. Did your brothers work in the mills?
9. What was it like growing up in the mill village?
10. Did you ever work in the mill?
11. Did you meet Frank in the village?
12. What year did you marry?
13. Did you move directly into a mill house?
14. During World War II did you work in the mill?
15. What did you do different during the war?
16. Were there many women working in the mill during the war?
17. What did you do when Frank came back from the war?
18. Did you enjoy working in the mill?
19. Did you have your children in the village?
20. Did you buy the house from the mill?
21. Can you tell me anything else about life in the mill village?

## Interview Questions

\*\*\*\*Peggy Sue Stevens Byrd

1. What year were you born?
2. Do you have any brothers or sisters?
3. What do you remember about living in the mill village?
4. How long did you live in the mill village?
5. Where did you go to school?
6. Did the mill help the schools ?
7. Where did you go to church?
8. Were most of the houses still occupied by mill workers?
9. Did your mother work?
10. Did you ever feel that people in the community looked down on you because you lived in the village?
11. Looking back, how do you feel about growing up in the mill village?
12. Did you ever think about working in the mill?
13. Does the mill still operate?
14. How has the village changed in your eyes?
15. Can you remember anything else you can tell me about growing up in the mill village?

Personal historical chronology

Frank Marvin Stevens and Nita Maude Williamson Stevens

- 1917 Frank was born
- 1920 Nita Maude was born
- 1935 Frank began work in the mill *Saratoga Victory Cotton Mill*  
*Ft. Payne, AL*
- 1939 married
- 1941 first daughter Linda was born
- 1942 Frank enlisted in the Navy for WWII
- 1942 Nita Maude worked in the mill
- 1945 Frank discharged from Navy
- 1947 second daughter Diane was born
- 1950's bought house from the mill
- 1952 third daughter Peggy was born (my mother)
- 1957 first son Frank was born
- 1981 Frank retired from the mill after 45 years