

Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Akin

Interviewee: Albert E. Driggers

8/10/1976

A: Of course, what we are trying to do is just to discuss, you know, your career with Avondale, your life here in the village. And, so, we aren't too concerned with the overall workings of the mill itself, but just primarily what it had been like to work with the mill and to work or live here in Avondale village. So to kind of get things started off, we're going to need some background material, like where you were born, raised, and things like that.

D: Well, I was born in Eufaula, Alabama in Barber County and I came to Birmingham in 1927, in August. I went to work for the L&N machine shop there at Boyles and I worked there 'til December and went to Georgia Tech as a coop student and in December of '27, I came to Avondale Mills and started to Birmingham Southern. I worked for Avondale Mills for forty-one years and five months. Now, what else...?

A: So, you started in December of 1927, with Avondale Mills?

D: That's right.

A: What was your first job with the mills?

D: I had charge of the boys' recreational program, boys and men. They had basketball teams, baseball teams, playground work, and a scout troop, camping... Blount Springs and in Florida.

A: They already had their Florida camp?

D: No, not in '27, they didn't. They had a camp at Blount Springs and they had a camp at the Coosa River called Camp Browning. That's mostly for Sylacauga and Alex City and I forget what year they bought the Florida property. The first property they bought during World War II—the Navy officers needed it for a naval training and then they went up the beach about twenty miles and bought the present camp they have now because the Navy didn't return the property when the war was over. They still have it.

A: This is what, near Pensacola?

D: No, it's ten miles from Panama City, down the coast toward Pensacola. Now, they have the camp about twenty miles from Panama City in the opposite direction. The present camp is...

A: Now, back during the '30s when, of course, things were pretty depressed all around as far as the economy, you used to take a bus down to Camp Helen, didn't you?

D: Oh, yeah, we ran buses. Fact is, Avondale Mills had five buses that ran in the summer from—oh, I'd say from about the last of May 'til probably the last of August and we'd have at least two busloads in there and two busloads on the way most of the time. I think they kept about—as well as I remember, they kept about one hundred and twenty-five to one hundred and fifty people there all summer from the various plants. They'd swap every five days. At the beginning, it cost you seventy-five cents to go down and stay three days and come back.

A: Wow, that's a little different than nowadays most places. Considering Alabama's roads back then, how long did it take you to make the trip?

D: Well, not only considering the roads, but considering the transportation. The first bus we had was an old Model-A Ford and it would take you about eight or nine hours to leave Birmingham and go on. Later, of course, as buses improved, the time was a little shorter, but it was a good six-hour trip even today. On the bus.

A: And so you would take the same crew down there and you'd bring them back a couple of days later?

D: That's right. Well, we'd go one and stay three days and come back one.

A: So five days.

D: Five days.

A: Mrs. Carey was telling me this morning that what would happen, the kids would have an allowance their parents would give them and you would help supervise their Coke money?

D: Yeah, you had to, or they'd spend it all the first stop.

A: What usually happened was the Padgetts would have to fix their meal coming back because most of them had run out by then?

D: Well, they used to do that anyhow. The camp would do that.

A: Well, what were the activities involved at the camp itself?

D: Oh, you had just about... you had fishing, you had boating, you had archery, you had dancing, just about anything you could want at a camp. Had a pretty good program all the way around.

A: And the camp was open, you said from what, late May through August?

D: Yes.

A: Of course, as the years went by the camp itself improved.

D: Oh, yeah. Now, it's air conditioned. They have permanent cabins, and I know people use it year around. If you make reservations, you have to make them two or three months ahead of time. The facilities now are year-round facilities...use them all the time.

A: I don't know if it is unusual, but at least in Avondale's particular case, the Comers seemed to be very close to the workers, at least here in Birmingham. The people I talked to.

D: Well, yeah. Mr. Donald Comer was a very exceptional man in every way. He was a... I don't know, he was an excellent business man, he was the type fellow that wanted to know all the people who worked with him and just about did. It wasn't uncommon for him to visit this village two or three times a week. If anybody was sick, why, he went to see them. He was just that kind of a man. He wanted to know all about his workers and I guess he wanted them to know all about him because he certainly did... I have known a time when he could call every family in this village by name, without any trouble—and most of the kids—that's how close he was to them.

A: And quite often, he would go out of his way to help them in time of need...

D: Oh, sure. He sure would.

A: Mrs. Carey was telling me this morning how Mr. Hugh had slipped her a hundred dollars when her father had died and they needed it for burial expenses.

D: They were that kind of people. He helped I don't know how many people through colleges no way of knowing. He helped me through college. At one time, there was four of us staying at the community house, going to college.

A: You went through during the '30s?

D: I finished in '31.

A: At Southern?

D: Yeah.

A: How did this work? Did you work your regular job and then go there at night?

D: No, I went the regular sessions, but I worked evenings and nights...

A: In the recreation room.

D: Right. I went to the regular sessions at Birmingham Southern.

A: You would catch the bus over there, or...

D: Streetcar. Had streetcars then, didn't have buses. It cost a nickel to go from here to Birmingham Southern and a nickel back.

A: And then, I know like even today, Avondale, I was talking to a student from Pell City, that Avondale gives students who are outstanding high school students an opportunity to co-op with Auburn.

D: Oh, yeah.

A: And that they will pay their expenses going into textile engineering.

D: That's been going on ten or twelve years. I don't know exactly how long, but at least that long.

A: So, uh, Mrs. Carey was also telling me about her daughter went to Birmingham Southern and they helped out while she was...

D: Oh, yeah, they helped out. Montevallo had—I don't know how many students went to Montevallo, girls particularly back then.

A: When that was Alabama College?

D: Yeah, they paid tuition. They didn't require anything except just to go and make good in your studies and they had three or four students at Howard and I think I was the only one who went to Birmingham Southern that I recall.. No, I wasn't. Bo Bagley went to Birmingham Southern, too, but Auburn, Alabama College, Howard, and Birmingham Southern. They had students there just about all the time.

A: As far as the community programs, like you were involved as a part of it, what all did it include?

D: Oh, well, it included the Community House and you could have swimming, you could have basketball, you had day and night school classes, you had a cooking school, you had a part-time school for young people who worked four hours and went to school four hours, and you had a playground. We were a member of the Birmingham playground group for about five years and we got too good and they put us out. We won all the championships, except one—we never could win the men's volleyball; we came out second. But everything else, Birmingham had on its Park and Recreation Board, we won. So, they said, "Well, you people are just too good for us." And I guess that was right, because we did have the facilities there and the leadership to do it. So, it was a little unfair in competition, but it made us feel good anyway.

A: Right. It gave you a community pride in something.

D: That's right.

A: Then, of course, you had things like the kindergarten.

D: Oh, yes, they had just about anything you wanted.

A: How many years were you in that position of the recreation?

D: Oh, I guess about thirty-five.

A: So, you were in that about thirty-five years?

D: About that. See, I had...when I finished Southern, I went to teaching and Mr. Donald asked me if I wanted to work here part-time. So I taught two years at Gardendale, five years at Jones Valley, and I became assistant principal at Jones Valley for two years and I was principal for thirty-seven years.

A: I didn't know that.

D: Oh, yeah. See, I was with the Birmingham and Jefferson County school systems for thirty-nine and a half years. I worked for Avondale Mills for forty-one and a half years. I ran the credit union for Avondale Mills for thirty-six years.

A: Pretty busy.

D: Besides that, I operated a filling station for them and I operated the cloth house for them. I was a "jack-of-all-trades."

A: Well, the principle-ship worked in pretty well then, because it left most of your summer free, didn't it?

D: Oh, yeah.

A: So that you could work with the recreation program?

D: Worked mighty nice. I had no troubles at all and if the mill never did... I mean if it came to a conflict between the school and the mill, the school won. 'Course, Mr. Donald was that kind of a fellow. But it worked out real good. I didn't have any problems.

A: Now, were you living in the village the whole time?

D: I've lived here, right now, forty-nine years, right in this village. In fact, in December, it will be fifty years.

A: That's great. So you—I guess, one could say you had a unique vantage point to look at the village situation.

D: Oh, yeah.

A: In that not only were you employed at the mill, but elsewhere, so you could see many of the benefits that the people just took for granted.

D: That's right. This used to be really a very close-knit community until the mill sold the houses to the employees. Then, of course, the employees began to sell and trade them, but at one time, you had to be on a waiting list to get into this village. And, believe me, you were thoroughly investigated and...

A: I asked Mrs. Carey. I said, "Well, how were the people who got into the village? Was it on the basis of seniority?" She said, "All I know: it was on the basis of caring."

D: That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

A: Well, which came first, do you think? Was it the loss of community right before they sold the houses or was it the selling of the houses that kind of started the...

D: Oh, I think it was the selling of the houses that really began the deterioration. Because as long as the mill owned the houses, they were responsible for their up-keep. They were responsible for the condition of the village, the cleanliness, and so forth and so on. They were very good about keeping the houses in repair and the surroundings clean and inviting. See, we used to have a doctor who came here twice a day, every day, had an office in one of the places. We had a nurse who stayed here permanently, a kindergarten teacher who stayed here permanently, a social director who stayed here permanently. So, there wasn't hardly any chance for the deterioration to take place, then. Once the mill sold the houses, it wasn't but two or three years until the people who had bought them—some wanted to move out and they sold them and they weren't particular who they sold them to. So you got a group of undesirables and you could do nothing about it.

A: When the mill originally sold the houses, do you think it was because they really wanted to, or was it a public relations type thing?

D: No, I think really it was, to some extent, to satisfy some desire of the federal government really, because that as the beginning of your racial discrimination and of your regulations and rules and the mill just felt that it would be better for them to get out from under the obligation. I don't think they had any real desire to sell the houses—but—of their own accord, but it was just becoming a nuisance with the regulations you had and the requirements you had to meet and so forth and so on. So the best way for them was to sell and, of course, that was back during the time of the Depression, really and, well, they got a good bit of money out these houses for that time anyhow. It would be no money today, but for that time, it was good money.

A: But still on the other hand, the people who bought the houses, the way it was arranged, they weren't really under any economic pressure—what was it, something like twelve or eighteen dollars?

D: I bought this house that I've living in now for \$2400, nothing down. Eighteen dollars and some few cents a month for twelve years and the mill paid the taxes and insurance, so you can't beat...

A: Can't beat that. And then, like, the water and sewage system, wasn't that the system that the mill still operated?

D: Oh, yeah, the water system was, yeah. We had free water for forty years. I reckon more than forty years, nearly fifty years we had free water.

A: You'd said earlier when we were talking out on the porch, that the village itself was built when the mill was built in 1897.

D: 1897.

A: So, then this would probably be one of the earliest mills to have a company village in the South, wouldn't it?

D: I don't have any statistics on it, but I imagine yes, that would be my guess.

A: 'Cause I know that U.S. Steel didn't start one 'til nineteen... well, after they took over TCI which would have been about 1907, and of course, theirs were on out mainly in the mining community. Well, how much did the community manage to stay a pretty much a solid community even with the urbanization that took place, until the houses were sold?

D: Oh, yeah.

A: In other words, Birmingham had just completely enveloped this area.

D: This was more or less—up until the time the houses were sold, this was more or less a self-contained area. It had all of its recreational facilities, educational facilities, its playground activities (softball, baseball, basketball, volleyball, horse shoes, tennis) just everything you could want. It was just all furnished by the mill.

A: Well, I remember in the late '50s, when we would come and see Orville and Mary, they didn't have a car and didn't seem to need one.

D: Nobody really actually had to have a car. It was fine and dandy, but when I first came here, there weren't three cars in the village. You didn't need them. You could ride to town for a nickel and back for a nickel, the street cars ran about every thirty minutes. So what did you need a car for? We had buses for recreational purposes baseball and everything.

A: The churches were right next door, Baptist and Methodist. That was probably what everyone was anyway.

D: Just about. Wasn't too many outside things that you had to have.

A: Now when the village was first built or even, I guess as near as the '30s and '40s, there were many different house type plans, weren't there? For each individual need? I mean, like ranging from the apartment buildings to the two or three bedrooms?

D: Well, your houses fell possibly into about three or four different classifications. You had, of course, ten apartments. Then you had about eight or ten two-story houses, and the others were three and four rooms. That's about the limit of the houses.

A: And then, of course, later on, the apartments... when were they torn down?

D: Oh, I don't remember, say ten or twelve years ago, maybe a little longer. All the two-story houses were cut down and made into one-story houses.

A: What did they do with the lumber on the second floor, just crate it off?

D: No, they used part of it to do some of the work in the mill, some of it in repair work, some in the other houses. Didn't crate any of it off, I don't think.

A: Now, as the children were growing up here, where would they go to school after, of course, they finished the kindergarten?

D: They'd go to Cunningham and the high school students went to Woodlawn.

A: It seems to me, at least as I see it thus far, that when you compare the Avondale situation with other people in the same economic group that there was more social mobility with their children than with many of them. In other words many of their children were able to go to college move into a better class.

D: Correct, correct.

A: In other words, it was the type thing that the only limits seemed to be your own ability and desires to obtain the goal.

D: That's it. It was possible for you to go to school if you wanted to work and do it. No reason why you couldn't.

A: Like, even for the adults. I know that through the community center, there was an offering of an adult reading program.

D: Oh, yeah. For years we had evening school for the adults that wanted to go, and night school for the others that wanted to go. That operated in cooperation with Birmingham Board of Education and that went on I don't know how many years, anybody could go to school that really wanted to go.

A: Were you instrumental in getting this?

D: No, I think Mrs. Malone was the originator of that to the best of my knowledge. She and Mr. Donald both firmly believed in it. They believed in every educational advantage for everybody who wanted to accept it.

A: Now, I've heard her mentioned several times before, as a very good coordinator of these things, since you did work with her, do you know how long she was with them?

D: Well, I don't really know, but I'd say for about twenty or twenty-five years. She was a graduate nurse and a trained social worker and she was an excellent supervisor—an excellent person.

A: She had so many different age groups and levels of competence to deal with. Now, when the mill closed—in, what, 1971 right?

D: To tell you the truth, I don't remember.

A: Well, what do you think was the reason? Why did it have to close?

D: I think you have probably two or three reasons. First was foreign competition, particularly Japanese and Korean competition. They could make the same type product that we made and do it much cheaper and they would copy anything that we originated. The second reason was the mill had become really outdated, and the third reason: your labor supply—particularly in a large city—was hard to come by in the textile industry. I think those were the three primary reasons the mill had to close.

A: Well, this Japanese—well, this East Asian competition, it had been going on for some time now, had it not?

D: Yes, to some extent, almost from the beginning, but—see, ordinarily, this mill made only sheetings and denims. And as the competition from those sources became greater, we changed into some very complicated patterns and fabrics of high quality and we would—the mill would develop certain synthetic processes and, what have you, patterns, dyes, at the laboratory at Sylacauga and it would cost an enormous amount of money. Well, the Japanese could duplicate that without any trouble, without spending anything for exploring and experimental work, so they would just take ours and copy it and send it right back and you couldn't tell the difference in the fabrics and designs and the dyes. So, we had all the expense of developing it—they just—they simply copied it and, naturally, they could under-sell anything that we did. That was unfair competition.

A: Plus, the U.S. tariff structure at the time did not really protect the American textiles industry. About the mid-'50s, wasn't it, that it really started getting strict?

D: That's right.

A: By the '70s, in order to compete, you had to have automated computer-type facilities and this one had become outmoded.

D: You see, your labor supply was a big factor. You could not secure the skilled labor that you needed to live in a big city and work in a textile plant.

A: Because you had competition like U.S. Steel and other steel industries.

D: That's right. All the steel industries around Birmingham and, of course, the pay scale of those industries was higher than the skill labor here because it was a more technical job.

A: Right.

D: So, at the beginning, Avondale Mills was fine for Birmingham, but at the end, Birmingham really didn't need Avondale Mills.

A: And so Avondale was able to go to places like Sylacauga, Pell City, Childersburg...

D: And Georgia and South Carolina.

A: Where people could come in from the farms and manage the farm, too, where both incomes helped out quite a bit. At the time it was sold or closed down, was there every any discussion of maybe turning it over to the city or becoming a museum type?

D: Not to my knowledge.

A: I was thinking of this Sloss Field situation, how nice a complete complex it would have made to have the textile mill and the iron industry.

D: To my knowledge, that was never mentioned.

A: So they figured that the only way to get anything out of it would have been to tear it down and sell the Avondale brick?

D: No, I don't think... the mill sold the property and the salvage company or whoever bought it did the demolishing. As I understand it—now, I'm not sure of this, but the property has been sold twice since then. I haven't been able and I don't know if anybody else has, as to what, really, the property is going to be used for. It was eight and a half acres in the whole plot.

A: What is its zone, commercial?

D: Industrial.

A: That also leaves the village very vulnerable, too, doesn't it? How is the village, itself?

D: This whole area itself is on industrial. Under the present provisions, you cannot build a house in the village. If it burns, you're just out of luck. The house is gone. You can repair it, but you cannot rebuild.

A: So, in other words, if people don't stop some of the deterioration that's going on with some of the houses here, there are going to be gaping holes?

D: That's right. There's already three or four.

A: Do you think, over the years that Mr. Donald Comer was head of Avondale, like you say he almost knew everyone in the village. Of course, Avondale has moved more or less from Birmingham now. Do you still detect this same sort of interest with the Comers who now control it?

D: I don't think so, not in Birmingham anyway. I don't know about the other places, though. Fact is, we never see them here.

A: I mean, even after Mr. Donald's death—what was that, '55?

D: Just about then.

A: Was there any change in leadership attitudes toward the village?

D: Oh, I think Mr. Donald was the type person who evidently loved people. His brothers were somewhat of the same type, Mr. Hugh and Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Bragg, but not near so much as he was. Now, the other members of the family—his son—I don't ever remember seeing him out here visiting anybody. He's went through the village three or four times, but so far as visiting and knowing people, I'd say it was very limited. Mr. Craig Smith, who was president-treasurer for a good number of years, he was very seldom ever here. Very few people ever really knew him personally, where everybody knew Mr. Donald personally. There was a difference in the leadership, I mean, in the closeness to the people.

A: Now, over the years, about how many people worked in the mill itself?

D: Well, at one time, there was a little over eight hundred working here. At the time it closed, there was about four-hundred and twenty, due to the fact of improved machinery, improved technique, and so forth and so on. Your work load—your work force was cut approximately in half.

A: Still a three-shift situation?

D: Still three shifts.

A: Were there certain parts of the year where the work was less than at others?

D: I think you had seasonal trends. That never was a big factor in the mills, as long as Mr. Donald was running them because the mills run. There was two or three times, maybe month or two that they had to be on short time, but other than that, Avondale Mills ran. If he had to put it in the warehouse, he put it in the warehouse, but the mills—the people had jobs. That isn't so today. If it doesn't sell, you don't stock it.

A: So, rather than a lot of overtime, he would just try to make sure you had to work all the time.

D: That's right.

A: How much of this concern for the workers and their closeness to Mr. Donald... I imagine this played a major role in their attitude toward trade unions, didn't it? We never were bothered with the union except for one time. That was about '36 or '37. This mill struck and stayed struck for eleven weeks and when we went back to work...at that time, we were operating under the NRA, too. We were the first, as I understand it, mill in the South to agree to operate under the NRA. But anyhow, we had to strike. The mill stayed struck for eleven weeks. This was the only plant of Avondale Mills that struck. When we went back to work, we went back on four hours a day for six months because the mill had lost all its customers and its markets and so forth and so on. And the strike accomplished nothing except suffering to the people and then after that, we've had no more union. I think the reason for that is we have always, at Avondale Mills, paid at least—well, we've always paid a cent or two more than the union scale, not because we're afraid of the union, but because, as Mr. Donald put it, he didn't believe in everybody being Baptist, or Methodist, or Presbyterian. He didn't believe in everybody belonging to a union. He always told his workers at every meeting that I was ever in, if and when Avondale Mills doesn't pay the union wage or a little better, you join the union.

D: In other words, why join the union, when you've already got what they offer?

D: ... usually a little better. That's the only time I think that the union ever gave us any trouble.

A: And, of course, that was understandable, since you were in the depths of the Depression at the time. But, it's very interesting, that was the only time they gave you trouble and yet in '46, they were going to try to. It must have been the very strength of Avondale...

D: They tried five or six times.

A: In '46, they tried to organize Southern textiles and their big slogan was "We're Going to Crack Avondale this Time."

D: But they didn't.

A: But, as you have just said, it was the '30s strike that is the only memorable event.

D: Right.

A: You said you worked with the recreation program and this type thing for a number of years and the last years before the mill closed, you were involved with the credit union.

D: Oh, yeah. I organized it and ran it for thirty-six years, then had to liquidate it.

A: What would you say were the workers' attitude toward saving money when they could?

D: It's a funny thing. For years, I don't know how long, but when I came here at least and up until '36, the mill would guarantee people who saved their money six percent and that was a real good interest rate back in those days. In fact, it was excellent. And yet, over those years of guaranteed interest, there was only seven or eight hundred dollars saved, and then in 1936, Mr. Donald Comer told me, "I want you to start a credit union." I had never heard of a credit union. He had been up to Greenville, South Carolina to a textile meeting and the federal people were there with their program. So, he came back and said, "Let's start a credit union." Well, I said, "Mr. Donald, it won't work, because what makes you think people are going to save money with me if they wouldn't save it with Avondale Mills when I can guarantee no interest and you guaranteeing six percent?" And he said, "Well, they said it would work. Let's try it." So I started a credit union. And when we closed out, I think there had been there, at that time, \$336,000 saved and we had made over \$8 million in loans and of that \$8 million in loans, we had lost \$23,000, for thirty-six years and that was with a shifting population. So it is remarkable what people will do if the people themselves become involved. We guaranteed no interest at all, but we paid interest every year except the first year. But the mill was guaranteeing six percent and you couldn't get them to save.

A: Now, your interest rate was, of course, based on your loan situation?

D: We paid never less than three percent. At that time, the banks weren't paying three percent, so we weren't trying to be in competition, but the federal law said that we couldn't pay over six percent. The majority of those years, we paid six percent.

A: In the '50s, it was four or five percent.

D: Then, when we liquidated due to the fact that the mill closed down, we paid off all share holdings at sixteen percent interest. So, it was a pretty sound financial thing.

A: Now, if there were four hundred and some odd employees when the mill closed down, what percentage of those would have been living in the village itself at that time?

D: I don't know that there's really any figures on that, but I would say that not over fifty percent.

A: I have asked several people about this; the male-female ratio within the mill. What would you say the percentage would be?

D: Oh, just roughly, I would say you have about sixty percent female employees.

A: So were most of them... well, I don't guess most of their husbands could be working there, too. What was the situation? Like, how many families would have both spouses working in the mill?

D: Oh, I think that at one time, that would run about seventy or eighty percent.

A: There would be a few women single or widowed who would be working?

D: Right.

A: But very few times would you run across a situation like Orville and Mary's, right? He was working there, but she wasn't.

D: Right.

A: Now, when people were working there over the years, did they usually always work the same shift or did this change occasionally?

D: It changed occasionally, but in a majority of cases, they worked the same shift.

A: Do you know if there was a differential for working the night shift over...

D: No, not for years and years. I think, finally along the last eight or ten years, there was possibly a five-cent-an-hour differential for the third shift.

A: Now, back to the discussion of always paying a little more than the union... This didn't even consider things like profit-sharing?

D: Oh, no.

A: That was in addition to that. So, if you were to tack that onto the hourly wage...

D: You had a much better pay scale than the union had. The profit-sharing plan said that Avondale must pay the going wage, plus at the end of the accounting period, the first profits would go to pay the preferred four percent. After that, the profits were paid 50/50. The employees got half and Avondale Mill got half.

A: In other words, the stockholders got half and the worker got half. Then, of course, you had a formula to figure out how much each worker would get.

D: Oh, yeah. The formula, as I remember it, you got so many shares for a year's service, plus so many shares per dollar earned, or five dollars earned. The two combined were used to compute your—the amount you got.

A: Just to sum up things... looking back, how do you see your career, your life with Avondale Mills and the village itself?

D: Oh, to me, it's been a very delightful pleasing experience. There's been some mighty good people here over the years and Avondale mills was always mighty good to me and I tried to be good to Avondale Mills. I tried to give an honest effort to them. They did me a favor, after favor when they didn't have to and I wouldn't trade it at all.

A: Okay, thank you very much.

D: You are welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]