

Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Aiken

Interviewee: Mary Owens Coleman

June 15, 1981

A: This is an interview with Mrs. Mary Coleman at her home in Birmingham in Avondale Village on June 15, 1981. Now from reading over that questionnaire that we filled out the other day, it seems that your folks have been working in mills for quite some time. Is that right? I noticed that you were born down in Sycamore.

M: Daddy worked the mill here. He was a farmer. My mother died in '42 but we lived here.

A: What did ya'll live on a farm out from Sycamore or did ya'll live in town?

M: Between Sylacauga and uh.....Childersburg Have you talked to Homer?

A: Oh, yes, I talked to him, I guess, in about 1976.

M: He told me one time and I asked him this morning and he said the only one he talked to was Leon Guy and I said I hadn't seen Leon Guy. I thought you talked to him before you come over here.

E: No. I'll need to get by and speak to him after we're through this month.

M: Well, he's there.

E: Yea, out in the shade

M: He's getting the lawn mower ready and got the motor off or something. I don't know what's going on.

E: You were from a pretty big family, a number of brothers and sisters.

M: Twelve of us.

E: Where were you? Were you one of the youngest or one of the oldest?

M: I was the youngest. My brother out in California he was next to me. My sister older than me she had a birthday last Thursday and she was seventy-nine. I'm seventy.

E: (Whispers) Turn this up. Now who was the first member of your family to start working in the mill?

M: Now, I couldn't tell you that. I had a sister she died at forty-three. She worked down there. My brother, I don't know when he started down there because they were all older than me.

E: Yea, started working down in Sylacauga first? Here at Birmingham?

M: He might of worked Sylacauga. I don't know. I was just pulled up by the hair of the head from one place to the other. I just don't, can't say all those details. I can't locate all that.

E: Yea, well ya'll started out, like you say your Dad was a farmer. You mentioned that your mother was blind. Right?

M: She had a tumor on the brain. They wanted to bring her here to be operated on. She said no. She wanted to go home. She wasn't blind then but she wouldn't let them operate so, she went blind. I remember I was only eight years old, I don't know how long she had been blind. I don't remember.

E: Now, do you remember much about when you first started working in the mill? You were pretty young at the time.

M: Yea, I was young. I was right out of school. I don't know. I had a brother-in-law and he was superintendent down there at that mill. I stayed with him and my sister for a while. Olan Dunn? You know the Dunns from way back then?

E: Yea, yea, E.S. Dunn and O. B.

M: E.M. Dunn and Olan Dunn. Olan Dunn married my sister. He was superintendent down at that mill.

E: Now which mill was he at at the time? Was that at Sycamore?

M: No, it wasn't in Sycamore.

E: Uh-uh, that was in Sylacauga?

M: Of course, I was living with my sister then. They had one daughter.

E: So, he got you a job in the mill. What was...?

M: No, I don't reckon you'd say he got me one. I was just staying with them and was going to school. Then I joined the Campfire girls and they used to send us down there to Tennessee to Comer's camp. They'd send us down there. I just quit so I could go to work. Get on home.

E: Now, did you stay with them after you started working or did you.....

M: No, I went and stayed with my other sister.

E: What was the first job you had in the mill?

M: Spinning.

E: Now I guess most people you don't start out as a spinner, do you? You start with other things?

M: Well, you have to learn regardless of what you start on you've got to learn.

E: Right.

M: They put you with somebody to learn you and I've learned a lot of them are not here to read myself. Then I went to the card room in Columbus, Georgia, and went down there and worked in the card room. Worked in Tennessee in the card room and then I worked with weaving shop and then I wound up here and it stuck.

E: While you were traveling around you had already married by that time, hadn't you?

M: We were already married then.

E: Where had your husband come from?

M: Columbus, Georgia.

E: Columbus. Is that where you had met him?

M: That's where I met him. Some people that he knew lived in the house where his mother died at. I was boarding there.

E: What was boarding like? Did you just pay out a certain amount?

M: You would just get you a boarding place in a boarding house and you would pay your board every week. I boarded down in Silura a long time. I boarded down at that big old boarding house downtown. I worked in a lot of places along through the years.

E: Was most of your boarding in a boarding house or did you ever board with families?

M: Not the sisters they're the ones I stayed with. We worked in Prattville awhile and stayed at an old house there. We worked Farmer's Yard and stayed at an old house there for awhile. I've been round and about.

E: What was the reason for moving? Was it usually better pay or better job? What caused you to move?

M: Well, see my sisters and all and my brothers were here so we left Siluria to come down here to Sylacauga. We come down here to get jobs. We worked a few days and called them to come down here. We stayed here the rest of the time.

E: Now during the time that you were moving around did you stay with spinning or did you start to learn weaving?

M: No, I learned weaving in Wellington, North Carolina. I was working in a card room and people we boarded with he was a railroad man, both old puffy. He was a railroad man and we boarded with them and his daughter worked in a weaving shop. She said why don't you go to the weaving shop and get you a job and learn to weave and get them to put you with me. So, I did. I didn't stay on but about two weeks with her and then they put me on a machine by myself.

E: Do you remember about during any of this time about how much you were getting paid?

M: Well, no, let's see, I think when I first went to work, I was getting about ten cents an hour, you know. I can't remember all that. Done got too old to remember.

E: By the time you moved here a lot of your family had already come here, hadn't they? Some of them?

M: I had been here. I had a sister here and a brother here. He worked in the card room and my sister worked in the card room. Her daughter worked in the card room and I had a sister that worked in the spinning room. I worked weave shop. That's the only place that I worked.

E: Yeah. Did you have much trouble getting a job up here?

M: Naw. They just happened to have an opening. I got on.

E: What was your husband doing at the time?

M: Well, he used to be a meat cutter. He used to work for the A&P Tea Company at their grocery store. He went over there and he was a cutter. He isn't now. He's been off from work for a while. But I worked until I was sixty-five.

E: Now, during the time you worked here there's several things that really probably stand out. Do you remember back when the NRA came in?

M: No

E: You don't remember going from that five and a half days to that forty-hour week?

M: No, there weren't many times that I worked forty hours a week. I used to work doubles all the time. I worked sometimes seven days a week, sometimes sixteen hours a day until my social security started.

E: Yeah, back in about '37, I guess? What do you remember about it? Why does that stand out?

M: Well, we knew we were going to get social security. We were going to get it when we got old enough to draw it. So, we did.

E: Now, from time to time there would be trouble in the mill. One time I'm thinking, that was back in 1940, I think they speeded up things in the weave room, especially for the battery hands. Do you remember walking out?

M: I didn't walk out. Of course, some of them walked out. We almost had a strike one time.

E: Yeah, back in '34.

M: Now, you see, I didn't have anything to do with that 'cause I was making a living and that's all I wanted. Then one time when they hired a colored woman in the spinning room, I think that's the first one they hired, the spinning room shut down.

E: Yes, that's during the 50's.

M: They pretended to come out. They shut down but I didn't. I guess union's all right. We were making a living. It's like I told Homer I'm very pleased with what I had out here. Yes, and we got our houses cheap and they paid our insurance and paid our taxes, furnished us water. What more could you ask for?

E: That's right.

M: I'm just pleased with my job. Donald Comer, there wasn't no better person in the world than he was I don't reckon.

E: Now, did you go down to Camp Helen a lot?

M: Well, no, I don't like down there. I went down there a time or two but I just don't like Florida.

E: Yeah, too hot?

M: Yeah, I don't know, I just don't like to go. There's a man down here his mother owned a big old place right on the highway, the beaches, right over there. Probably, took the kids down there some. I don't know. I just don't like Florida.

E: Now, what about Blount Springs? Did you go up there?

M: No, I don't think I went to Blount Springs. I might have gone one time a long time ago. It's like I said. I don't remember all these things. My memory's not good, you know.

E: Now, when they would close the mill down for vacations, what would you usually do?

M: I'd stay here and keep my money to pay my bills the next pay day. I knew I only got paid every two weeks. I would stay at home and keep my money to pay the bills till the next time come. I wasn't getting all that much to pay the bills you know, I never did go on vacations. I went to Panama City once or twice but I just don't like it.

E: Now, during World War II is probably the time that you worked the most or at least a lot of people were working a lot during that time. Do you remember much about it?

M: I remember the war ending must have been World War I. You were talking about World War II. I was staying with my sister in Sylacauga, Eula and Olan Dunn. Of course, I was smaller then. I heard the whistles, the car horns, and everything you know. I said what in the world is the matter. She said the war is ended. (Something distracts her and the tape cuts off.)

E: In fact that was in 1918.

M: See if I can figure out how old I was then. I'm seventy-four now.

E: Now, after World War II, it seems like at least in the reading the *Avondale Sun*, that things started to improve a lot.

M: I weren't working then. I was too little.

E: No, World War II.

M: Oh, World War II. I was here in World War II.

E: Right after the war, ya'll started getting some big bonuses.

M: Oh, yeah. We got good bonuses. I don't know about when. We used to get it every week or every two weeks. Then we started getting it once a month. Yeah, I got some good bonuses. Sometimes it was \$300.

E: Had you saved enough up when they sold the houses to make the down payment?

M: Well, when they sold the houses we didn't have to make no down payment. When they sold them, they let us have the house for--- mine was \$1850. That's what I give for this one right here. They taken out I think it was six dollars and something a payday for down payments.

They paid the water bill, the insurance, the taxes and all. We made the payments. In fact, we didn't have to pay no water bill till they bought that put that mess on the dairy.

E: Now when did you buy this house next door?

M: I bought it from Lois. She was living over there and then she married and moved to New Orleans. I bought it. That was about '72. I don't know. I can look on my deed and see.

E: Have you managed to find anybody to live there?

M: Well, I've had one or two old ladies. This couple I was telling you about. This boy's mother came down and lived through the winter and went back to Florida for the summer. He got a job last summer somewhere down there so they don't come in the winter now. They stay down there. So, I just let it sit over there. I don't want them to hear everything I say. One man he wanted my house to sale. I don't like to talk about things like that. Too many people hear me. It's a nice place. I could rent it now easy. I have to be careful. I'm here by myself.

E: Now what shift did you work on most of the time?

M: I worked on any of them. It didn't make no difference. I worked on first, second and third. I retired and they wanted me to come back to work and I worked five years part time, just where ever they needed me. Of course, they needed me nearly all the time. I worked five years like that. Just part time, wherever they needed me.

E: Now back when your husband was living, did ya'll usually try to work the same shifts?

M: No, we worked anywhere they asked us to. I saw Murray Nabors. He used to be the boss out there. I saw him in the mall the other day, him and his second wife. He told her said she was one of the best workers I ever had. Don't matter what you would tell her to do, she wouldn't say a word she would just go on and do it. Some of them moaned and didn't want to do nothing. I never did say nothing. Whatever they told me to do I'd go ahead and do it. They was all nice to me, everyone of them. I tried to do my job the best I could. I didn't argue with them about nothing. Mr. Jenkins, I liked him when he was superintendent. Well, I liked all of them. They was all nice to me. That's all you can ask for.

E: Now, did ya'll get involved in a lot of the community activities like down at the community house?

M: We'd go down there once in a while but not too often.

E: Did you keep up with any hobbies? Did you sew or anything?

M: No, I had all the hobbies I could do here at the house.

E: (Chuckles)

M: I used to start on Saturday mornings going all the way through my house washing all my blinds and curtains. I can't do it now because I'm not able. My sides killing me right now. I took some medicine. It's been hurting since last Friday. I've got all the things I need. I sure did hate to see that mill shut down. I'm telling you that was something else. Seeing it tore down.

E: I don't think shutting it down bothered a lot of us as much as when they tore it down.

M: Tore it down. It just felt like...

E: Of course, that's what got me off my can on this project. It had been shut down four years and I didn't think much about it. But when they tore the thing down, then it hit me that if somebody doesn't get around and talk to you folks now your history is going to be gone.

M: Well, they bought one house on the corner in March and it was knocked down. They had to move out. I tell you these apartments are about four hundred and something dollars a month. I couldn't afford that with the utility bills, my medicine and groceries. I couldn't afford that. I'm trying to get some work down out there but I can't get anybody to do it.

E: I tell you it's so expensive. I called my wife and talked to her Saturday. I had managed to mow the front half of the yard before I left home but I wasn't able to finish the rest because it was raining so much. So, she hired a little neighbor boy to finish half a yard. I guess my backyard is about twice the size of yours. Six dollars---that's a lot.

M: I cut my grass in both yards. I cut this Friday. I went to the doctor Friday and when I got back from the doctor I got out here and cut my grass. It looked like it was going to rain which it did. It started raining on my before I got through. It was sprinkling but I managed to get through. That's when we had that hard rain. I cut my grass over here and over there, too. Try to keep my yards clean. I can't mop because of arthritis. It don't hurt to stand up and cut the grass. I just do what I have to but if I don't have to do it, I don't do it.

TAPE CUTS OFF

E: After the interview we talked for a while and she mentioned that she and her husband owned first a T-model and then an A-model and then finally had bought a Chevrolet later. That was about all during the conversation we had later that really tied in with her Avondale years.