

Avondale Mill Project

Interviewer: Edward N. Akin

Interviewee: Alda Donahoo

December 17, 1976

A: Mrs. Donahoo, what we would like to start off with is you just telling me where you were born, what it was like growing up, what your family did, that sort of thing.

D: Well, I was born on a farm and my father was a farmer for years. Then he come here.

A: Now, when were you born?

D: 1896. August the third.

A: And you were one of how many children?

D: Eight.

A: And how many of those were boys and...

D: There were six boys and two girls.

A: And what order were you? Were you the oldest, youngest?

D: No, I was third.

A: Third of....

D: Of eight children, uh-huh.

A: Now, you said that when you were growing up to begin with that y'all lived up on a farm in Tennessee.

D: That's right.

A: What part of Tennessee?

D: Lincoln County, Tennessee.

A: Lincoln County. That's just across the state line, is that right?

D: I imagine that's right, I think it is.

A: Do you remember much about the years before you came here?

D: Oh, yeah. I remember cotton, hoeing cotton.

A: About how many acres did y'all farm?

D: I couldn't tell you that because I don't know.

A: Do you remember what life was like, you as a child...?

D: Well, it was happy to me. We had a happy life.

A: Did your folks ever comment about how rough it was for them? I take it it must have been or they wouldn't have come here to work.

D: Yeah, yeah. That's right.

A: So, by the time you came here, how many of you were living, how many of you children?

D: My two youngest brothers was born here in Alabama.

A: So there were six of you...

D: Six of us.

A: Now, had any of you grown up and moved off?

D: My oldest brother.

A: And what was he doing at the time?

D: He was baling [hay].

A: Did your folks ever comment on how they came in contact with Avondale Mills, or how they knew to come here?

D: My mother had sisters that lived here and they worked here and they helped us get a job here.

A: What was your maiden name?

D: Mine was Billings.

A: Billings.

D: Uh-huh. Billings.

A: So your mother had a sister who was already working here in the village?

D: Her family was, yes, uh-huh.

A: So, did your folks come here already knowing they had a job here?

D: Yes, they did.

A: Okay, y'all moved here in 1910?

D: Right. March 10, 1910.

A: And moved into what?

D: Seventy-one.

A: Number seventy-one.

D: Park Avenue.

A: Now, did—to begin with, did your father or did the whole family work?

D: My father and myself.

A: The two of you.

D: Uh-huh.

A: And, uh...

D: Then later on my sister went to work.

A: This was your younger sister?

D: Yes.

A: So, you started working in the mill when you were about fourteen?

D: Yes.

A: What was it like back in 1910, back in the dark ages?

D: Well, you mean before I come here?

A: No, when you first started.

D: I enjoyed it. I liked it.

A: What type of shifts were you putting in then?

D: The first shift. From six to six, I believe.

A: Twelve hour shifts.

D: I think.

A: Do you remember how you were paid? Was it on a hourly rate or piece-work to being with?

D: It was the hourly rate.

A: Do you remember how much?

D: No, I sure don't.

A: You started work in what department? What were you doing?

D: I was a creeler on the warper.

A: Now, you want to explain what a creeler does?

D: Well, I don't know whether I can or not. The warper is a great big spool and the creeler, the spools are smaller, and they run this thread off this small spool onto the big beam, they call it a beam.

A: What stage of the mill process is that? Was this one of the earlier parts of it?

D: Well, I think the warpers was here when we come here.

A: No, I'm talking about as you take the bale of cotton into the mill and start developing it.

D: Oh, that goes to the card room and all, I don't know about that.

A: From the card room, it goes to the...

D: Spinning room.

A: And then...

D: They bring it down to the spooler. That's what Mary did. Then they put this thread on the warpers.

A: So that's where you are.

D: Yeah.

A: You're in the warping room?

D: That's right.

A: Now, about how many people would be working in that room per shift?

D: Well, at that time, we had fourteen warpers, and three warper hands and three creeler hands.

A: So sx of you ran the fourteen machines.

D: Yes.

A: How were the machines run back in 1910?

D: How was they run?

A: Were they on electricity or steam power? How was the mill...

D: I believe steam, wouldn't that be right?

S: Might have been back then.

D: I think steam.

A: And you would put in twelve-hour shifts, did you have any time for lunch?

D: Oh, yeah.

A: What, thirty minutes off or just whenever you could...

D: Thirty minutes I believe is right, uh-huh. I'm pretty sure about that.

A: Now, they were running two shifts then? Two twelve hours?

D: No...

A: Just one?

D: Just the one-hour shift.

A: Now this would have been in 1910. What type of materials were y'all making back then?

D: Just solid colors and white.

A: In other words, they would take the white through and dye it or leave it plain?

D: They dyed the thread.

A: And then they would weave it. What different type of fabrics were you making?

D: Nothing but cotton, was it?

A: But I mean, was it muslin, or....

D: They called it chambray.

A: And what would they make after it went out of the mill? Was this a type of clothing they would make?

D: Yeah, dresses and shirts and—well, anything—aprons.

A: Is there any material that we have today that would be similar to that?

D: Yeah. It's solid chambray today. And they probably make it in some of the mills.

A: Then as time moved on the mill started other types of processes?

D: That's right. And stripes and checks.

A: Do you recall about when each of those were started?

D: No, I don't.

A: Now what was it like in the mill itself, in the village, when you first started?

D: Oh, in the village... Well, we had water in the yard.

A: So you went out, what, front or out back to get the water?

D: Front. Had a...

A: What, a well pump?

D: Just a hydrant. And the bathroom was in the back.

A: The outhouse.

D: Yeah.

A: Y'all gathered around for a Saturday night bath, or how...

D: Tin tub bath. We didn't have no bath.

A: You'd heat the water out back here in the winter?

S: No, heat it on the stove.

A: What did you have, wood-burning or coal?

D: Coal. We didn't have any sidewalks.

A: And no paved streets?

D: No.

A: Did they already have the Community House and things like that in operation then?

D: No.

A: Do you recall what year those first started?

D: No, a man come over here an asked me not long ago did I remember, but I don't.

A: So, when you first came here they didn't have the kindergarten or the Community House or any of the...

D: They probably had the kindergarten. I don't know about that. I don't know. But they didn't have the Community House.

A: Did they have a company doctor?

D: Oh, yeah. Dr. Comer.

A: He was here that early?

D: Yeah.

A: Really?

D: Yeah?

A: About how old do you think he would have been then? Because he seems to have been around for quite a while.

D: Well, he was the doctor when we come here and we been here all these years. He's dead now. But he would be real old, wouldn't he?

A: Yeah.

D: 'Cause I'm eighty years old and I know he's older than I am.

A: Now, when you came here in 1910, of course, Mr. B.B. [Comer] was still in charge.

D: Yeah. That's right.

A: Do you remember much about him?

D: No more than just seeing him.

A: What, would he visit the mill occasionally?

D: Yeah.

A: Or did he work out of the office here or downtown?

D: I couldn't tell you that because I don't know.

A: Now, of course, the member of the Comer family that the folks here remember best is Mr. Donald.

D: Mr. Donald, that's right.

A: Now, he took over when Mr. B.B. [Comer] retired about what, 1917, somewhere in there.

D: Yeah, but I don't know just when.

A: Did he, right off, make any changes or was it just a gradual thing as far as his relationship with the...

D: I think it was just a gradual thing. That's the way I think it would be.

A: Would he always, uh... what I'm trying to do is figure out when he came to know the mill folks to well, because everybody I've talked to said that he knew almost every—

D: He did.

A: ...and every family and every individual here.

D: Well, he would visit the mill and he would visit the homes.

A: Do you remember any specific incidents or situations where he could come by and talk with you or maybe help on repairs to the homes or things like that.

D: Well he come through the mill and stopped and talked with you on the job.

A: And ask if there were any problems or anything?

D: Yeah.

A: Several people have told me about the times during the 1930s when the family might be in, say, a death or something, or hospitalization occurred in the family and they were just up against a wall and somebody from the Comer family would come by and help them out, financially.

D: Well, I'm sure that's right. Or course, I don't know anything about that. But I know they would; I believe they would.

A: Now, you started working here in the mill in 1910 with your dad, then later your sister began working?

D: Yeah.

A: Did your mother ever have to work?

D: No.

A: Was your father pretty strong on things like having your mother stay at home and rear the children?

D: He thought that was enough for her to do, yes. She never had to work.

A: Because even after you came here she had the two youngest. So, she always had her hands full.

D: That's true.

A: Now, when did your father die?

D: He died in '42.

A: Did he work up until his death?

D: No, he had been retired about a year or two when he died.

A: Now, you first got married in 1913?

D: Yes.

A: Just a few years after you came here. Did y'all move into another house in the village?

D: No, we stayed with mama and papa about a year or something like that and then we moved out on Fortieth Street.

A: You couldn't find other housing in the village at the time?

D: Well, we didn't try because he didn't work at the mill.

A: It was much easier to get a house in the village if both people worked there.

D: I imagine, yes.

A: So, y'all moved out on Fortieth Street? Do you recall what the rental rate was?

D: No, I don't know. I sure don't.

[TAPE CUTS OFF]

A: Now, when we left off, we had just gotten you over on Fortieth Street with your husband. Did y'all just walk to work every day?

D: He was a molder.

A: Now was that in the mill, or elsewhere?

D: No.

A: He worked somewhere else.

D: Uh-huh.

A: And so did you walk to work?

D: I didn't work.

A: You didn't work at that time?

D: No.

A: Okay. For how long did you not work at the mill during that time?

D: Must have been about three or four years, don't know. I don't remember.

A: Well, what prompted you to come back to the mill to start work again?

D: Oh, you mean when I come back?

A: Yeah.

D: It was after he died. He died in '24. And not too long after he died, I went back to work at the mill.

A: Did you move back in with your folks here in the village?

D: Uh-huh. Here.

A: Now, at the time, were the younger kids still young or had they already moved out?

D: No, Earl and Sam. Now, my sister and my brothers had moved out. Yeah, they had married and moved, but the two youngest boys were still at home.

A: Do you recall if they went to the company kindergarten or not when they were growing up?

D: I don't remember about that, I just don't remember.

A: You came back to work in 1924 after your husband had died.

D: Yeah, right. After he died.

A: Now, there had been a few years between when you had worked. Now had the mill improved any like in working conditions? Were y'all on an eight-hour shift by then or was it still in twelve hours?

D: I believe, the best I can remember, we worked 'till 3:30. I believe they had changed it to that, I think.

A: Now, when you started work in 1910, you were fourteen years old.

D: Yes.

A: Do you recall many children working in the mill during the 1920s? I mean by this full time, not part time.

D: No.

A: The only time that Avondale ever really had any labor troubles was the strike of 1934.

D: That's correct.

A: Do you recall that?

D: I do. [Laughs.]

A: What was it like?

D: Well, it was hard on people.

A: Do you recall who the instigators of the strike were?

D: No, I don't. I know I wasn't.

A: Did it seem to be people in the mill or people outside trying to organize the union?

D: They had outside organizers, but a lot of people in the mills was compelled to go along with it.

A: Right. What seemed to be their reasons for wanting to join the union?

D: Well I reckon for more money, wouldn't you?

A: Yeah.

D: That's what I'd say.

A: Did you talk to many of the people who were in the union? Or did y'all, more or less, draw the lines between the groups?

D: Yeah.

A: And then they went out on strike and Mr. Comer just said, "Everybody go home until this situation cools off."

D: That's right.

A: And, of course, those had to be hard times during that strike period.

D: Yeah.

A: How were you and your family—your folks—able to make out during this time?

D: We got—they didn't call it food stamps, did they?

A: No, not back then.

D: Well anyhow, we got help, we got groceries.

A: Over at, what did they call it, Esau's?

D: I guess that's right.

A: Over on South Avondale?

D: Yes. That's where we had to go get it.

A: And, other than groceries, that was about the major concern of that time because you had the house you were living in.

D: Yes.

A: Do you recall if the mill suspended rent payments during this time to where they said, you know...

D: I don't remember about that, 'cause see I didn't pay rent. I don't know.

A: Right. So this was a period of about fourteen weeks. Do you recall what it was like when you first started back to work?

D: I was just as happy as I could be. I was glad to be back at work.

A: But didn't y'all start back on half shifts to begin with?

D: I don't remember about that.

A: Well, why do you think that the union wasn't able to organize Avondale?

D: Well, because there wasn't enough people to join it.

A: Okay, you folks that didn't join it, what were your reasons? I mean, why did you see no need in joining?

D: Well, I didn't know much about it and I didn't want to get mixed up in it. And I was happy like I was.

A: Then, the mill started back up and y'all were able to go back to work. During this period from 1910 on, do you recall any—shall we say—major breakthroughs in your wage scale? Did it just seem to gradually go up as the economy...

D: It just gradually went up.

A: Do you recall the first time they started giving bonus checks? Or what they called "profit-sharing"?

D: Wasn't it in thirty?

A: Yeah. I think it was about 1930, somewhere right in there.

D: That's when I think it was.

A: How did that operate?

D: You know that was one of the most wonderful things that ever happened. It just started and when it started you could join for as little as a quarter. Whatever you wanted to put in they'd take it out of your pay, the amount that you wanted to put in. Well, they'd take it out of your pay. That's the way I saved what little I saved.

A: But each year, y'all would get bonus checks...

D: Oh.

A: This is another thing you're talking about.

D: Oh, you're talking about bonus and I'm talking about credit union. Yeah, we'd get a bonus.

A: Back to this credit union, you started putting into the credit union in 1930, whatever amount you could put in.

D: Yeah, you could join for a quarter and I think a quarter is what I put in at that time.

A: Were you able to keep all this money in the credit union until you retired? Did you ever have to...

D: I drawn some of it out one time. But when I retire, why, we had a good little bit in there.

A: Over now to the bonus situation. This started about the same time as the credit union, is that right?

D: I think it did.

A: And I imagine that during the thirties the bonuses weren't anything to write letters home about. But at least you were getting them from time to time.

D: Yeah, that's right.

A: When would they come out? Was it once a year, twice a year?

D: Once a year.

A: About when? Do you recall what part of the year?

D: It seems to me like in the fall.

A: So right in time for your Christmas shopping.

D: Yeah, yeah. They still give them.

A: Now, they also had—what would you call it—incentive on the production, things like not making errors, what would you call it? Zero defects? When did they start that?

D: Well, I don't know, because in my part they didn't have that...the part that I worked in. And I told you...

A: Oh, yeah. That would be in the weaving process...

D: ...Warping. When I first come here they had fourteen warpers and then we just had three. Those three warpers done the work of the fourteen.

A: After the technology and machinery was improved.

D: Yeah. They didn't have them too awful long before I retired.

A: So, you were one of three on your shift?

D: Yes.

A: Speaking of that, did you notice over a period of time that it required fewer workers?

D: Yes ma'am. [Laughs] Yes, sir. I sure did.

A: In every department?

D: Yeah.

A: So, by the time you retired, which was—what?—about 1958, about how many workers did they need to run the mill?

D: Well, I couldn't tell you, 'cause I don't know. But not near as many as there was.

A: And then they were on three shifts?

D: Uh-huh. Three eight-hour shifts.

A: Do you recall much about during World War II, you know the patriotism posters within the mill, kind of like: "You're Making this for the Cause" or this sort of thing?

D: No, I don't.

A: Did they have any war bond sales?

D: Yes, yes.

A: Were many folks able to buy it?

D: I bought some.

A: And when did these occur? Every month or so, or how often did they try to push for a person to be able to buy them?

D: I don't know what it was. Seems to me like about every three months. Now, I'm not sure about that, because I'll tell you my memory is not that good.

A: How big a bond would you buy each time?

D: A \$25.

A: And then right after the war, of course, it seemed like cotton textiles would go on forever, the economy was going real well and about the time you retired it was still going.

D: Oh yes, yes.

A: But, of course, after you retired I guess you would talk with the people who were still working in the mills...

D: Yeah, I did.

A: ...And during the sixties it seemed like with Japanese imports and competition that things were really getting rough.

D: Yeah. Yeah.

A: What do you think was the reason that they had to close the mill here in Birmingham?

D: I've often wondered why they closed the mill. Now, I don't know why they closed it.

A: Now, of course, several people have told me that during Mr. Donald's lifetime, it was a thing of sentiment.

D: That's right.

A: He wasn't going to allow the mill to be closed.

D: Yeah.

A: Now, yesterday, didn't you say that for a time you worked in Sylacauga?

D: Uh-huh. For a short time.

A: What, a few months or something like that?

D: Oh, I don't know how long, not too many months. I was spooling down there.

A: When was this, during the twenties, thirties?

D: Yeah. During the '20s. About '21, I guess. I'm not sure about these things.

A: Was it after you came back to work or during this period when you were married to your first husband?

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

A: Did you notice any big difference between the mill here and the one in Sylacauga?

D: Just about the same.

A: The village situation was about the same?

D: The best I remember.

A: And did Mr. Donald seem to interest himself in the Sylacauga Mills as much as the mill here?

D: Well, I don't know about that, but they built a community building which was real nice and they had apartments all up and down here. You remember that, I guess?

A: Yeah.

D: And they fixed the village up, they put the shingles on these houses and put the paper on the others.

A: So these others originally were just that clapboard siding?

D: Uh-huh.

A: Painted brown?

D: Uh-huh.

A: I noticed some of the singles were off.

D: That's the way this one was.

A: Now, you said that these—during World War II—Mr. Donald had a shipment of Cyprus brought in from Florida and had these singled here.

D: Yeah, but I don't know about where he brought them in from but they...

A: I imagine... was this the same time they put the paper on the other houses?

D: Same thing.

A: Now, several people have commented that over the years you could see an improvement in the type of folks that lived in the mill village, that there didn't seem to be near as many folks who would just come in for a little while and then leave. Were you able to tell this type of change?

D: Yeah. It seemed like they would stay longer, you know, than they used to.

A: And keep up their places better?

D: Uh-huh.

A: Do you recall about when the Community House was built?

D: No, I sure don't. I don't know.

A: This would have been before...

D: It was in the early twenties.

A: The early twenties.

S: Maybe before.

[END OF INTERVIEW]