

Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Akin

Interviewee: Homer Butts

109 39th Street, Birmingham, AL

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A: Mr. Butts, I would like to just start out by you telling me when you were born, where you were born, where you were raised...

B: Well, I can't get that date just right.

A: What, about the 1890s? You said you were eighty four.

B: That's right, 1893. See, I was born up here close to Warrior, down there on that creek.

A: Canyon Creek.

B: Canyon Creek. I went from there to Cordova, and I went from there to Cordova come from Cordova here, and been here forty-five years now.

A: How old were you when you started working at the Cordova Mill?

B: Eight years old.

A: They didn't know anything about such things as Child Labor Laws?

B: Oh, there wasn't any such thing as Child Labor Law. B. B. Comer started that off.

A: When you were eight, were you working full shifts or part-time?

B: I would just work a little while and then go out in the yard and lay down out in the old mill, usually.

A: In other words, you would work as long as...

B: Oh, they were working twelve hours a day then. We went to work twelve hours a day back in them days.

A: Was this five days or six days a week?

B: Five, six days. No, it wasn't no six days; it was five days.

A: So, you started work there at Cordova, when you were eight. What were the conditions like in that mill?

B: Oh, they were alright back in them days. Everything was lovely and all. They didn't pay nothing...

A: How much did they pay?

B: I made forty cents a day, twelve hours a day.

A: Did your parents work in the mill, too, or any of your brothers or sisters?

B: My brothers and sisters all worked in it.

A: Did your folks farm, or what were they doing?

B: My folks farmed, you see. My daddy farmed.

A: In other words, it was a family affair?

B: We worked public works the rest of our lives, I reckon.

A: And then you came from Cordova to Avondale when your shift closed in 1929?

B: Where, here?

A: No, at Cordova.

B: Yeah, I left there in '29. I quit there and came here.

A: Well, you had a pretty interesting story about how you got at Avondale, the other day.

B: See, back them days, didn't nobody pay nothing. I stayed with them and learned it all and then I come here. I went in the service and stayed two years and then got out of there. I never was satisfied at Cordova no more, and I came here and I been here ever since.

A: Now, you served in the service back in World War I? Did you ever go overseas?

B: Stayed over there nearly two years. When they drafted me in May and in June, I was over yonder.

A: Then you came back and you said that Cordova never could satisfy you.

B: I went back to Cordova and I wasn't satisfied no more.

A: And then in '29, you thought you were going to have a job over in Atlanta, wasn't it?

B: No, it was Fayette, Georgia. I had started at Fayette and was traveling by train, you know. Well, I got in here that morning and my daddy-in-law lived right up here in number 21, I believe, and I come out here to see them, 'cause I couldn't get out of here 'til afternoon. So, I had a brother-in-law working over here in this mill and I thought I would run over here and see him. I got over there and got to talking to his boys and he said he would give me a job and I studied the thing over for a few minutes and I decided to take him up on it. I felt like they was good people to work for, and they was. I never worked for nobody in my life that was better than Donald Comer. He was one of the finest men I ever met.

A: Now they offered you a job in the mill at that time. What did you start out doing?

B: Walking the floor, making my own job just helping this one and that one, doing all kinds of jobs. That was the only kind of job they had. He didn't have to hire me; he didn't need me.

A: Now this was Mr. Donald that did this, right? That just told you to walk the floor 'til you found a job?

B: He said, "You go ahead." So I went ahead and stayed around in there for a long time, and I told them I didn't believe that was going to hold up. So, I got another letter from that man. I kind of felt like that wasn't going to hold up, you know, me staying here and him having plenty of help, actually he didn't need me. I told my boss about it, I reckon when he got to his office. He told me to come to the office and I went out there to talk to him and he said, "Are you satisfied here?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm satisfied here, but I just can't feel like this here is going to go on unless I get a permanent job." He says, "You got a permanent job, and you'll get a better job."

A: Sure enough.

B: Well, I stayed on with it, and I'm still here. Of course, Mr. Comer is gone, that one is, Mr. Donald. He died a few years ago, but his son took over the mills.

A: What was Mr. Donald like? What type of person was he?

B: Well, he was one of the best men I ever seen, the world's best. I reckon he was a Christian man. He went to all churches and he give churches all money. He give every one of them in Birmingham a donation every year. He paid that. I think he donated to this preacher that preached up here on the hill, so much a month.

A: That was back in the early years that you were here?

B: Yeah, and on and on and on...

A: Oh, until he died. What did he do within the mill itself that showed the type of person that he was, as far as community activities?

B: He didn't work. He owned the thing. He would just come to it every once and a while to see how it was all getting along. He wouldn't pass you up because you was over doing a job. He had something to say to you. He used to come out after I retired, park right out there and come in here and sit right where I'm sitting now, and we'd talk a long time. I never meet a man like him before in my life. That's wonderful, and those people who worked here with him all these years before I come here, they was all crazy about him. They loved that old man. He was good to them. He sent their kids to school and when they got so old, they would go to school a half a day and work half a day, see. And he educated a lot of them right down here in the Community Building they just tore down not too long ago. They had a teacher down there and a kindergarten here all the years. That kindergarten was there when the mills shut down.

A: And anybody who wanted to further their education could, even the adults. Didn't they have a night course?

B: Yes. Them old people liked him... wonderful man.

A: Does this help explain why Avondale never did unionize?

B: Yeah, I think... he put a profit sharing plan on and they all made good that way. Well, they got a birthday check and they still get that.

A: At the other mills?

B: Yeah, they're all the same.

A: Well, the only big labor troubles that y'all had was back in 1934.

B: Yeah.

A: Do you remember that one?

B: Yeah, I remember that well.

A: Now, by that time, you were an assistant foreman, weren't you?

B: Yeah.

A: In what floor, what department?

B: Spinning department where you make the thread.

A: Now, most of the people under you would have been women, right?

B: No, there was women and men.

A: Some women and men...

B: We had doffers.

A: Oh, yeah, the doffers were in that department, too. Well what, as you see it, what seemed to happen in '34. Were there just a few rabble rousers or a lot of people wanted to walk off...

B: Well, there was a lot of them didn't know what they was jumping into. There was a lot of people who hadn't ever had any experience like that.

A: And, of course, times were hard and so when somebody came in promising that they could get you more wages...

B: Well, you see the North could do that. I had all that stuff back in my younger days before I come here with the coal diggers, you know. They'd come down in this section of the country and get these coal

diggers out down here, well heck, they would be making money up yonder. Well after, there was a lot of these boys didn't have nothing, and they still had to go back to work and they didn't get nothing. They followed for a long time and eventually just quit it.

A: We were just talking about this union question and you had mentioned that coal diggers up in the Jasper-Cordova area.

B: Yeah, that's coal country up there. That used to be...they got a lot of coal out there. They eventually got out of it somehow or another. I was over there last Thursday. I had a sister-in-law that died and her husband was buried over there down below Cordova in one of them coal mining towns. I went over there last Saturday. First time I had been over there in a long time. I don't ever go over there anymore. I got people that live over there and the only time I ever go over there is when something happens.

A: You were off for fourteen weeks during that strike period in '34. How did you survive?

B: I don't remember just how many weeks we was off.

A: How did you make ends meet during that time?

B: Well, I got by, myself, but a lot of them didn't. It was rough. I reckon they decided the best thing they would do is go to work. He was a man I found out that if he seen that something was going to change, well, he didn't wait 'til the last minute to do it. He just went ahead and done it.

A: For instance, in the area of wages, it seemed that Avondale always kept one step ahead of the union outfit.

B: They still do. I think they still keeping ahead. Well, back then, those people... I couldn't hardly see how they was going to make it, 'cause times was tough and I think that's where he got along so well. He sold a lot of stuff to other countries, exported stuff, and he kept his mills running pretty good, all of them.

A: All during the '30s.

B: Once in a while, he had to curtail some of them, but he did his best to keep them all going all the time and I think he made a good job out of it.

A: Did both you and your wife work in the mill, or just you?

B: Just me then, 'cause I had two kids and she never worked until after our kids got through school. She worked a little while though.

A: Do you recall what some of your wages were? For instance, when you first started, how much were you getting an hour?

B: I think it was about \$18.40 a week.

A: And then right after World War II, what were you making?

B: I kept moving up all the time. I'd get a little more and a little more. So, I've done pretty good. Ain't nobody keeping me up. I still keep myself up.

A: Now, back when your children were growing up, what were some of the community activities that they could be involved with?

B: Who, my kids?

A: Yeah.

B: They didn't do nothing but go to school. And my son, he got a pretty good size boy, there was a filling station here at that time and that old man out here, he'd come out here and pump a dollar or two. Every day, he'd call and come out there and he weighed 215 pounds when he was eighteen years old.

A: Well, did both of them go to the kindergarten?

B: No, they never did go to the kindergarten. They went to Cunningham School. I reckon I made it pretty good in that Depression. I managed to have a job or something the whole time, you see. When I had a job over yonder, they didn't believe in raising wages over there at that time and after I left there, that company got on the ball when...

A: That's over at Cordova?

B: Yeah, and they paid good wages. But those people just shut it down. They wouldn't work. Had hoped to get this one down and people got to where they'd work when they wanted to work. Well, a company plant can't make money they might as well shut it down.

A: Do you think that's what happened with this one?

B: I think they were paying... I guess there was a third of the people worked over there making time and time and a half, and that runs into money, when you're paying good money anyway. That keeps things going up on the ball. You'd hire today and he might come back tomorrow, you don't know; you couldn't tell. Well, if he didn't, this other man would work over and they'd pay him and time and time and a half, so...

A: Well, did you always live in this house once you moved out to Avondale?

B: We lived right across the street there for, let's see, July 'til about three weeks from Christmas.

A: That was back in 1930? When did you move into this house?

B: '29, in the last part of '29. Got in here two weeks before Christmas, cold man! We had the hardest freeze that I ever seen in my life. Everything froze. They had them old trolley runs out there and you couldn't get up the street. You'd have to slide out of it. That was awful.

A: What were the rents back then, do you remember?

B: I think my rent cost me some five dollars and some few cents. I don't remember.*

A: But that included electricity and water?

B: Yeah, all of it, all but you heat. Had to buy coal though.

A: Where did you buy the coal, though?

B: Oh, everybody used coal in Birmingham for years and years.

A: So, it wasn't any trouble getting that.

B: I think it was \$6 a ton then, and now it would cost \$25 a ton, I guess.

A: Were you able to save much during the thirties? Were you able to put back any money?

B: Well, I got by, of course, if my wages went up, I did that much better, you see. They didn't none have to help me. I managed by myself. Well, I was raised to work and I liked it. I f I wasn't so old, I'd be better off working now than sitting in this house.

A: Yeah, that's true.

B: I could have been working all these years that I done been off. What happened, our superintendent here asked me if I wanted to go to Eufaula, wasn't tied in with these mills then, but they are now.

A: Yeah, that was the...

B: I told him no, that foremen down there works twelve hours a day and I don't want that. So I said I'll just give it up.

A: Now, once you were an assistant foreman, how were you paid? Were you paid by the hours or by what your spinners produced?

B: Well, I was paid by the hour. After a few years, we got on a straight salary. I don't remember what year that was in. I made more money by the hour, you see.

A: Right.

B: For a long time, but they eventually changed all these foremen and put them on straight salary.

A: Now, would you just work one shift and be on call the others?

B: Eight hours and I'd come home. Of course now, if my buddy wanted off then I'd work for him and if I wanted off, he would work for me.

A: You were on the first shift?

B: I used to be on the first shift; I took the second shift. I liked the second shift.

A: That was what time, two to ten?

B: Yeah. You see this sports stuff? A man who likes sports, well, he's up against it working on second shift.

A: Right, he misses all the baseball the football.

B: I wouldn't give two cents for. I don't even bring my juice to that, 'cause I don't care nothing about it. I could have had first year all year if I had wanted it.

A: Back in the '30s, did they just run two shifts or three?

B: Well, they run two for a while back in the '30s. They didn't start the third shift until after the war, you know, they began trying to put everybody to work, give them jobs and put them all on three shifts...

A: ...during the war? During World War II?

B: I believe they went on the third shift when Roosevelt was elected. I think that was when it was. I just don't remember that much.

A: During World War II, do you recall having production quotas and this sort of thing?

B: Oh yes, they expected you to get a certain production, of course, in everything. We always had a pretty good number. Now, a lot of people worked for a scale, you see, and we didn't work upstairs. We got paid by so much production, you see. They kept talking about getting that other thing, but that would be pretty hard to do in a spinning room. We got good wages and made good money.

A: Well, speaking of the different departments, what was it like? What type of personnel did you have working under you? Were the spinners always reliable? Did you have trouble at times with some of them?

B: We never had trouble but one time. That ended that. I never did have no more trouble. People back in them days, those people that was working for Mr. Comer—they were pretty good to the old man, they liked him. They liked Mr. Donald and they was all pretty agreeable to him and they would do most anything he wanted them to do. Now he was a man—I'll tell you what, I thought the world of him.

A: Well, everyone talks about Mr. Donald—that's Donald Sr. Were you still working at the mill when he retired and Donald Jr. took over?

B: No, no...

A: Or Craig Smith, first.

B: Oh, Craig Smith... he was already president.

A: Right.

B: I believe Mr. Smith stayed on that job for twenty-something years. That's a fine man. Now Mr. Donald—the one who's on there now, Junior—you see, he was in New York. He was up there at the sale...

A: Merchandising.

B: So, he come down here and took these mills over in Eufaula and he run them for a few years and then when Mr. Donald died he took in... these other mills... Mr. Smith, he retired out and he had heart trouble, that's a fine man though. He was one of the best man I ever seen.

A: What about the other members of the Comer family? Do you remember them very well?

B: Well, they worked at the other mills. I wasn't too well acquainted with them.

A: So Hugh and Braxton Bragg...

B: Mr. Bragg, he come here and stayed a while. I hadn't been here long when he come here a while, but his health began to bother him a little bit. He just went down on a farm and he stayed there.

A: Down in Eufaula, down at their old place?

B: At their old home place. He went into cattle business.

A: Now, what about Mr. Hugh?

B: Mr. Hugh, he stayed down there at Sycamore and Pell City, down in there. He just never come up here very much.

A: What was it like living in Birmingham in those days?

B: Well, I'll just be fair about it. I never have care too much about Birmingham.

A: So you pretty much stayed with the village or went back home to visit relatives?

B: You know, it's crowded all the time and things like that. When I lived in small towns, you could go hunting any time you wanted to go hunting. Of course now, you can't do that because the undergrowth of the country is so grewed up now, you can't get through the woods. So, I used to go there and go hunting and fishing.

A: Did you take advantage of things like Camp Helen? Did you go there very often?

B: Where, down at the camp?

A: Yeah.

B: I still go down there about, well, I think this past year I've been less than I ever been. I used to go down there every two or three months and stay a few days after I quit.

A: Back in the '30s, did you have a bus load to go?

B: I worked here seven years at one time without a vacation.

A: Really? During those years, did your family get to go down while you didn't?

B: They'd go while I was working. See, back in them days, we had buses, school buses, and he'd send these people down there to stay a week. And when they shut out a week in the summer, we'd all go down there and stay a week. I don't think you can beat that.

A: What year did you retire?

B: Well, in '61 is when I quit and I signed my papers in '62.

A: Are you still getting money from the retirement trust now? Or has it already run out?

B: No, I'm still getting it.

A: That, plus Social Security.

B: Now, those people that stayed on over there after I left, a lot of folks had a pretty good wad over there.

A: Yeah, those that really built up a lot of time.

B: Yeah, it kept building up more and a little more and a little more ever since I quit, you see. Gracious I been out a long time.

A: You sure have.

B: So, whole lots of companies have got that now. If they'd all put that in at the time that Mr. Comer did, all those little mills would probably been running today that had to shut down. Them was on white goods. Those small mills was all on white goods.

A: In other words, no dye, just straight cotton goods.

B: You see, that don't go no more; that's all we had.

A: When you first started?

B: Yeah, when I first come here, that's all they had and, frankly, all that I think was exported. Well, when that give, we had to get on to something else and we got on it and got on it fast. We didn't hesitate. We went to work at it and you see that white goods, that's what shut down a lot of those small mills in this country and that's one thing shut down Cordova and that was one of the best mills in the country. They made nap goods and all, but now I know that three or two little mills in Lafayette, Georgia—that's where I started when I came here—they're both on white goods. Well they went just as long as they could go on that and that mill has been shut down for a long, long time.

A: Now, when you say “white goods,” is that both bleached and unbleached, or just straight unbleached muslin-type things?

B: Yeah. We had all kinds of stripes and colors and all kinds, you now you got to have that now to go.

A: Well, why do you think that the mill here closed?

B: Well, they just wasn't making no money out of it.

A: Was it just the machinery was too old?

B: They was just paying out more than they was making. You see, I imagine their taxes here is a heck of a lot. You take those foremen, making about \$900 a month. The help was getting good money. If you keep losing money all the time, you got to do something about it, get out of it or it'll break you. And I think the other mills claimed that they hoped to keep this one going, thought maybe it would get better. But they had good stuff over here. They had the best. But white stuff don't go no more. You take all them lil ole Alabama mills that was scattered around this country down here; they all closed up nearly. I think one or two are still running some, I don't know. I believe one down there in the country running.

A: When you came in 1929, from Cordova were there very many other folks that came with you?

B: No, didn't come with me no, but later on, there was several of them began to get in here. I had a brother, he came and worked over here at the shop. I think he had about twenty-something years over here when he retired out. He went home and sat down in the rocking chair and didn't live long.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

*Mr. Butts rented a three-bedroom house.