

Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Akin

Interviewee: Helen Barnes, at her home in Stevenson, AL

8/22/1980

A: [This is an interview with] Helen Barnes at her home in Stevenson, Alabama on August 22, 1980. Ah, I noticed that you started that you started working the mill right after World War II sometime. Do you recall the exact year?

B: I guess that was about 1945, I guess. I worked there for about—ah, let's see. Yeah, I was working, I believe it was '45, 'cause I know I worked two different... I was laid off two or three times. Two different times, I guess, two different times. I didn't get to work too long the first time when I went to work and I got laid off. I was the youngest hand on the line.

A: Yeah.

B: And I got laid off. You know, the work was slack. Then, I can't remember how long I was off. But they called me back and I worked extra, just on weekends, when somebody else would want off.

A: Yeah.

B: Then, I worked a while and then I got laid off again. And I was off six months that time. And I signed a leave. So, when I went back to work the next time, it was December of 1947. But I can't remember the exact date.

A: That's—I'm not one of those history people who worry about exact days.

B: 27th of December, I believe. Must be my age, I don't know.

A: Now, had you always just worked in textile mills or had you done other things before you started?

B: Well, no—now I—my first husband died in 19 and 44. And after he died, I worked over here in town at the dime store a while. Then, I worked in a restaurant a while and then I went from that into Avondale and I worked for Avondale—with or out of Avondale 'till...the last day I worked was in March of '76. I had to take a sick leave. I had this arthritis and I was—never did get able to go back to work. And I stayed on sick leave alone toward the last of the year. And the doctor kept telling me that I was going to have to get out of winding work. So, I—I finally just made up my mind that I would just quit.

A: Yeah. Now, you—you had grown up around here.

B: Yes.

A: Where were you born, and when?

B: Well, I was born—

A: Tell me something about your family.

B: I was born up in Dorn's Cove, out from Bridgeport, here in Jackson County. And then, we moved to Stevenson in, oh, I think I must have been about seven or eight years old. And then, I've been here ever since.

A: And your family were—was your dad farming, or...?

B: Well, now, my daddy died when I was just young. And that's how come us to move to Stevenson. My daddy died and my mother had an aunt down here. And she met this man that she married, my stepfather, down here at her aunt's at an ice cream supper. So, they got married and we moved to Stevenson. And I've been in Stevenson ever since.

A: Okay.

B: And I, of course, I married young the first time. And my husband, he died in 1944. And I went to work right—well, not too long after he died—out to Avondale. I had a son, he was just small, he was between seven and eight years old when his father died. And I didn't have any other choice but go to work.

A: Yeah. Now, you were talking about these lay-off periods. Did that sort of thing happen fairly often during that period of time, that people...?

B: Well, yes sir. They was—was really, I can't remember. Now they had, you know, the work would get kind of slack and they would lay some of them off and they'd always lay the youngest hands off. Then, when the work would pick up, why, they'd call us back. And as I said, the first time I was off, why, I didn't know that I was supposed to sign a leave of absence. Didn't any of them say anything to me about it and I think it was kind of dirty of Mr. Bowles. I maybe ought not to say this. He should have told us. They didn't—there were several of us that, you know, the same thing happened to.

A: The same sort of thing.

B: So, the next time, then, when I had to take a lay-off, I went to the office and told the fellow that worked in there that I wanted to sign a leave. And I—I remember well, I was off about six months and then they called me back.

A: And that way, if you signed a leave, then the time you had put in could accumulate—

B: Yeah, if I had got to done that the first time. But you see I didn't.

A: But the second time, you could since you have taken the leave that time. Ah now, you were saying that you were a winder. Now, I've been working with the Birmingham and Sylacauga situations. And they made primarily denim, but in general cloth. So I'm not familiar with what a winder does.

B: Well, you see, we made yarn out here for carpets.

A: Right.

B: And, what I did was wind the yarn off on these big old cones that come from twisters to the winders. We had great big old bobbins, some of them—oh, they was that high. That's what was about to get the best of me, with this arthritis, was lifting so much. See, we had to lift those bobbins, set them on the rails, and fill up those big old cones, take them off, put them in a box. Actually, you had to lift the yarn about twice.

A: About how much would each one weigh?

B: Well, some of the bobbins weighed anywhere from fifteen to eighteen pounds.

A: And you would operate how many—

B: We'd have to—

A: Ah, would you, each person is responsible for?

B: I think we had about, part of the time we had twelve and part of the time we had eighteen spindles to keep up. Most of the time, we had about eighteen and part of the time it was twelve. It—a lot of it—it depended on the kind of yarn that you was rewinding.

A: Well, in other words, eighteen would—were eighteen spindles the same as twelve in a different type of thing? Or was it a stretch-out situation?

B: Yeah, I guess that's what you would call it. Because there was some of the yarn... if it was heavy, say, in other words if it was 3-ply (which we hardly ever did have any 4-ply) why, you couldn't keep up as many as eighteen spindles. But if the yarns, you know, single yarn or 2-ply, why you could run about eighteen spindles.

A: Now, now. What did it come off of into the winding room?

B: They brought it from the twisters, down to the winding room on these big old—

A: Okay, the twister would take two or three different kinds of...

B: Of yarn.

A: Of yarn.

B: Off of these big old racks.

A: And put them together.

B: They'd bring it down to, you know, the winding room.

A: Yeah.

B: And then, we would take it off of those racks and put it on, well, they called it rails. Thread them up, fill up those big old cones. Have to take them off, well, actually, we lifted it three times, and stacked them in the box, you know, the cones, the big, old cones.

A: Now, yours would have been the last part of the operation, right?

B: It went to the packing room from the winder.

A: The, it was shipped out from there.

B: That's right.

A: Now, I know that many times skill levels within the mills get fuzzy. But, would your job have been one of the more highly skilled jobs in the mill? Or, can you tell from...?

B: Well.

A: You know, when you don't work in other areas, I realize that sometimes hard, difficult to—

B: Well, I can't say that you would call it that because it seemed like, you know, the winders always had to catch all the mistakes that you could. Because, you see, it went directly to the packing room when we got through with it.

A: Well, one good way I've figure out to find that out is to look at the wage scales. Do you know if you made more than, say, the people in the spinning room would have? Or did y'all make about the same regular rate of pay?

B: No, the spinners made more than we did.

A: Yeah. Was it—

B: They always made more than the winders.

A: Was it, was it by the hour or piece work?

B: Well, they—they paid us by the hour. 'Course, they had our work, well actually, they pretty well tried to have it all set up on production before I left out there. But, of course, they paid us by the hour. If you didn't get to run the amount of, you know, pounds that they had set up, why, you still got your pay. But sometimes, you—if you had good yarn, you could make production, and sometimes you couldn't make it.

A: Yeah, now—

B: So, I—I think I always looked at it this way. I you stay on your job and do a decent day's work, you're not going to be complained at, nowadays.

A: Yeah, yeah, that's true. Now, I've been working like I pointed out earlier, mainly with Birmingham Mill thus far. And, of course, they had a village there of about one hundred and twenty houses and that sort

of thing. And, of course, here there are only eight houses on one short street. So, I assume you lived out in the community during most of the time you worked.

B: Well, pretty well right along here where I'm at now.

A: Yeah, yeah.

B: When we first married, we lived out two, I guess, two miles out there. Two miles out in the country on the other side of town. Then, we decided that we would move to town because we both worked in town.

A: Right.

B: So, actually, I've been here about most of the time that I've went to work.

A: Now, in Birmingham, due to the fact that most of the workers lived there near the mill in the same small area, there's a strong sense of community that went beyond the workday. Was this sort of thing true here in Stevenson? Or did everyone just seem to go about their, you know, whatever they were doing once they left the factory gate?

B: Well, I guess that's about, you know, would be about right.

A: I mean, for instance... Well, one thing I don't detect at Stevenson: a mill church, for instance.

B: Yeah.

A: Am I right there? There would be no one church that mill workers and on one went to.

B: Oh, no. Everybody, you know, went on—went to church wherever, you know, that they wanted to—wherever they preferred to go.

A: Did you go to Camp Helen frequently?

B: No, I never did go but one time. I went way back, not too long after I went to work out there. I went one year. That was when they furnished buses for the employees to go on. I went and took my son. He was just small. And I don't remember how long it was, but it wasn't too awful long after that, you know, you had to furnish your own transportation to go.

A: Yeah.

B: Then, one year, when my husband was working out there, they sent—we went with this couple from Sylacauga. We went to Fort Meyers and, where else did we go, Lester? Was it Silver Springs?

L: Yeah, I think so.

B: Yeah, we went to Fort Myers and... Where else did we go, Lester? Was it Silver Springs? Yeah, we went to Fort Myers and Silver Springs. We was gone a week and we had a wonderful time. But I can't remember, what was this couple's name?

L: Pinkerd, was it?

B: What?

L: Pinkerd?

A: Pinkerd?

B: Yeah, Pinkerd.

L: Worked for—at Alexander City, wasn't it?

B: I believe that was where they worked. Anyway, we met them in Sylacauga and we went together, two couples of us.

A: This would have been back in the early 50s?

B: Yeah, it was 'bout fifty—What was it? Excuse me. Lester, about '53 or '4, '5, or something?

L: Yeah.

A: If you went down to Naples, back then, Fort Myers, that—that was a trip.

B: Well, we really had a trip. I'm telling you—

A: Wasn't exactly the interstate highways.

B: No, we didn't have no interstates. But, we had a good trip. We had a nice trip. We had a—[we] enjoyed it.

A: Now, once you got on with Avondale, on pretty much of a permanent basis after those first two lay-offs, what shift did you usually work?

B: Well, I started out on the third and I worked it a while. See, you have to work yourself up to the first shift. And I stayed on it, I don't remember how long. Then, I got on the second shift. I worked that a while and I finally got on the first shift. I worked on it for several years. I guess, really, I stayed on the first shift longer than I did either one of the others. I sure didn't like that night shift.

A: Was there any type of shift differential? Or did everyone just work up as they got seniority?

B: Well, you just have to work there, you know, as you get seniority.

A: Yeah.

B: You know you just have to take your turn when it comes—somebody quits or, well, in other words, like they, you know, put in more machinery or something like that, maybe that would give you a change to move up.

A: Did people in the winding room and other areas of the mill... Was new employment just—did it come strictly through the personnel office or did people tell a relative or a friend about a job that was fixing to open? You know, was it a type of thing where a number of relatives worked in the mill together?

B: Well, now we—I had a lot of relatives that worked out there. But, actually, you just—you just, well, I'll put it this way: if you were lucky enough to get a job, why, and could hold it, why... 'Course, I had a brother-in-law that worked out there, well, he's still working. He kind of, sort of helped me a little bit—gave me a little break, talked to Mr. Bowles. I don't know. Dick Ballard, you make know him.

A: Yes. In fact, I just talked with him.

B: He's my brother-in-law.

A: He's put in a few years.

B: All of his life.

A: Almost literally, I think.

B: Well, and I've got a step sister that—she's been out there—she's been there a whole lot longer than I was. She's, of course, she was in the lay-off, but she's going to retire. She'll be sixty-two in November.

A: Yeah, so it isn't going to affect her too much.

B: No, they severed all of the employees that, you know...

A: Okay. Within the mill as a whole—of course during the '60s, all three were operating. Was it a point of company policy or just didn't matter at all, say, having children or spouses working in the same area as employees?

B: Well, it—they was, you know—a lot of people that worked in there that, you know, was husband and wife and even had children in there. In some cases, it didn't seem to matter too much, you know, how many of the family worked. Somebody in our family died. I believe it was—do you know Barry Smith? He used to work out there. He was plant manager at the time. Somebody—he had made the remark (I believe it was him) [that] he didn't realize that he had as many as he did out of one family working there: sister-in-laws and brother-in-laws.

A: Yeah.

B: I don't... I was working and Dick was working and this step-sister of mine that... and her husband, and I had a step-brother's wife was working, and I don't remember whether that was all or not. Anyway, they had a pretty good bunch of us.

A: Yeah. Did a number of the children tend to work part-time, say, during the summer or after school?

B: Well, not too much. Now, they, they did have a few occasionally that, you know, that would work a little bit part-time, but not... Well it got to where, the last few years that they was—well, they had

several, I guess, that worked part-time. They—they'd let some of the school boys work on weekends, you know, cleaning up. They was a few of them. They got to where they, you know would let them work on the evening shift. Some of them would come in, maybe, like, you know. They'd get off from school, and work 'till ten. Probably wouldn't—they wouldn't get but six or seven hours. They would, you know—they got to where that they would let them do that.

A: Did there seem to be some people, or maybe even a number of people, who would work for a while and then quit for a while and come back, and that sort of thing? Or did most people, once they started working there—

B: Well, now, they had some of them that did that. But the majority of them, you know, when they went to work they just, you know, stayed with it.

A: Because it may be just the difference between the time periods, but I noticed that back during the 20s and 30s, like in Birmingham, there was a very high turnover rate.

B: Well, the might have had, you know, a good bit of that before I went to work out there. I guess they did. But, after I went to work they, you know, there wasn't too much of that.

A: Did the—in the Birmingham situation also, there was a very wide-ranging company welfare program. In other words, kindergarten, athletic programs, swimming pools, all that sort of thing. Now, did Stevenson have any sort of thing like that?

B: No, they didn't. They didn't have when I went to work and they, you know, they just never did have anything like that after I went to work.

A: I'm wondering, since it was a fairly small mill at first, until the 1950s when they started adding the other mills, was there really any need for that sort of thing? Say, like a kindergarten?

B: Well—

A: Or did—were there other things in the community—

B: Not necessarily other, you know, that they wasn't...

A: Did those of you who were working in the mill itself—were you very much aware of when members of the Comer family would come and visit the mill?

B: Well, most of the time. Occasionally, maybe, they—you know, they might...maybe some of them might drop in, but not, not too often.

A: 'Course, for an inspection, you were well aware.

B: Oh, yeah, yeah. We sure was.

A: What all would go in preparation for the spring inspection?

B: Well, they just always did a lot of cleaning and painting and, well, you know, just things like that that needed to be [done]. Really and truly, I guess, they was a lot of times that they, the mill wasn't kept as clean as it should have been. I'll just have to put it that way. I know usually they had been a few times before I quit, maybe. Well it didn't necessarily have to be any of the Comers, some of the big men would be coming. They would come in unexpected.

A: Yeah, Mr. Bowles said he had the habit of, at times, of going over to the mill at about two o'clock in the morning and just walking through. Little surprise to some people, I would imagine.

B: Yeah, he would do that. He was good at that. He could go around all hours of the night and day. Mr. Bowles, he really, you know up until he—he was really—well, I guess he could do more than, maybe two or three of them did.

A: Yeah. Well from—I had talked with him this morning. And from what I can see, he pretty much saw this mill as almost a child of his, something that he worked at and really had put his whole life into.

B: Well, he did. He—he really put his whole life—

A: Maybe, sometimes a little more than some of the workers appreciated.

B: That's right. He's a pretty good old feller.

A: Did—did people tend to encourage their kids to get into mill work or to try to better themselves in other ways?

B: Well now, some of them did and some of them, you know, didn't care about their children going in the mill. But the majority of them seemed like they did, unless, you know, they wanted to go to school and 'course a lot of 'em, you know, when they went to school it would be for textile work.

A: Now, you had mentioned your son. He—is this your son or grandson?

B: No, that's my grandson in there. No, my son worked—he never did work at Avondale. Well, now, he did work a little out there one time on construction when they first built Grace.

A: Right.

B: But he didn't—he didn't work much out here. He left here not too long after he got out of school and he didn't stop for a long time.

A: Now, of course, my study will be stopping in 1955 with the point of which Donald Comer stepped down from active management with the company. Is there much you recall either about him personally, or some stories or anecdotes about him around the mill?

B: Well, no. Not that I—I just don't remember anything much.

A: Yeah, I know. Of course, you had not been working but about seven or eight years I guess before he retired.

B: No, I hadn't been there that long.

A: Now, he probably kept coming around occasionally after that. I think he didn't die until, seems like 1962.

B: Yeah. It was about '62.

A: Well, what were some of your other activities outside the mill? Hobbies or community work or clubs or organizations?

B: Well, I never did have any time for much activity. I used to work in the garden and [by the] time I do that and keep house and work and that's about all I could handle. And, most of the time, my husband worked. He's on one shift and me on the other one, and just kept us busy, so I really didn't have much time to, you know, for anything like that. I used to like to go fishing when I'd get a chance to.

A: It's nice. I've got a brother-in-law who grew up in Haleyville and he's coaching at Scottsboro now and he has that boat. He'll never leave Scottsboro. He's too much of a bass fisherman to do that. What, do you usually go out to the river or anywhere?

B: I just went to a creek, fish with a pole.

A: Yeah. Well, can you think of anything else that we've left out or I've failed to ask, which could be quite a few things.

B: Well, not off. I don't believe I can think of anything else. I—I enjoyed working out there. I really enjoyed, you know, the work and the people that I worked with, too, and I've really missed them since I... It'd get kind of nerve racking when we'd get ahold of some bad yarn, but I guess after you stay in a place.

A: What would, is it just the breakage, or how do you...?

B: Well, you have to stand to break down. It would kind of have thick and thin places in it. And a lot of 'em called it "slugs," you know. If you've been in there much, you can tell, you know, by looking at it, whether the yarn's any good or not. Now, when the yarn would run good, you know—it—you enjoyed your work more.

A: Now, you used a term there that I've seen before, but never had anybody explained to me a "slug". What's a "slug"?

B: Well, it's just a big 'ol place in the yarn. Sometimes, there'd be places that long, where—excuse me—it was twisted up on the twister. Say, if it was 2-ply or 3-ply, maybe they—there'd be two threads that would be good and then this one of 'em would have this, well, sometimes... I don't know, I think maybe it might be lint off the twister that would get in it and some of it was—it was just bad yarn.

A: Yeah, like the slug itself is too thick? The thickness is—

B: It wouldn't go through the slug catcher.

A: Yeah. Now the slug catcher—was that before your process, or...?

B: That was, see, it had to go through the slug catchers to fill up these big cones on the line. You had to, you see, you had to thread it up and the slug catcher was the first thing your yarn went through when you started up running (??) on these big holes. And—

A: And once you had finished your part, pack it up, send it to Dalton or wherever...

B: Ready to go. We had to be, you know, very particular with our job, if you did it right.

A: Did most people come into the mill from around here, or did—

B: Yes. Most of them did. They, you know, most of the people—well, now after they built all these other mills, they used people from out of town, Bridgeport, South Pittsburg, Sherwood, different places were. ..See, here for a while after they built those other mills that had, well, really had three mills that was a diet plan. I think they had between, when they—it was running good _____ (??) I think we had between four and five hundred employees in all of 'em. It was quite a bunch. 'Cause sometimes we'd, oh, we did a lot times work on weekends, on Saturdays and lot of times, we'd have to work Sunday, too.

A: After 1955. Mr. Bowles was saying that Donald Comer just didn't allow Sunday work.

B: No, he didn't care much about Sunday work, but after Mr. Comer was gone, maybe, I guess there was lots of things that—

A: Yeah, lot of things changed from what I can gather.

B: Changed, after he passed away.

A: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]