THE COTTON MILL VILLAGE IN RETROSPECT

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"In the 19th Century," according to Sir Alex Douglas Hume, "the stately progress of events enabled change to evolve imperceptively and even when there was social convulsion, communication was so primitive that it was isolated and infection was not carried far and wide." Today, we are living in a period when communication of knowledge is instantaneous. Transportation is easy and available to all. Understanding still takes time. The pace has so quickened that we seldom look back to the earlier period when orderly economic evolution was possible. To me one of the major values of our Historical Society is to allow us to study that "stately progress of events" mentioned by Six Alex and to share our studies with those interested.

Reece Cleghorn wrote that: "One of the biggest changes in the textile industry today which is affecting and will continue to affect the textile workers is the evolution of the mill village. The former villages, entirely owned by the mills, have practically disappeared and the towns are incorporated in a part of a larger political unit." [1] This is very true in Greenville and the rise and disappearance of the mill village makes an interesting study of change.

On the other hand, Dr. David Pender, a research economist at the University of South Carolina, recommended in 1970 that one solution for the problem of urban slums today is the moving of these slum dwellers into rural industrial villages:

> That the establishment of small, rural hamlets near major industries may be the weapon to win that war on poverty and the cure for the hopelessness and violence of the city slums. The use of strategic hamlets would offer a portion of the nation's poor an alternate way of life, and it could make productive, useful citizens of the poor who have been living out their lives in not-so-quiet desperation.[2]

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[1] New York *Times Magazine*, November 9, 1969.

[2] *Greenville News*, January 29, 1970.

He maintains that each hamlet should be limited to a population of 1,000 and:

> should include a day care center to facilitate job opportunities for women; and low cost housing should be provided with the assurance that residents can later purchase the homes . . . . The new implanted communities should be constructed on land near the plants, providing new job opportunities for the poor, and that the Federal Government could purchase relatively low cost, open land where potential job opportunities exist for the poor, both from the city and from the rural areas.[3]

This is a most interesting proposal from a modern economist at a time when our mill villages, planned and developed during the last century, have done what he suggests and are disappearing as a result of improvements in transportation and communication plus a desire of the operators to own their own homes. At the same time, mill executives have found the villages too expensive to keep up so are selling the houses and are gladly getting out of the welfare and rental businesses.

The early cotton mill village evolved from economic expediency. The cotton mill executives needed labor concentrated within walking distance of the plants. Homes were not available, so villages were built near the mills. Each village developed a pattern of its own as a result of the owner's taste and the needs of the people who came to work there. To understand this, let us examine briefly the beginnings and growth of the cotton mill industry in the South and its necessary adjunct, the village.

August Kohn, one of the acknowledged authorities on the history of cotton mills, tells us in his 1907 book, *The Cotton Mills of South Carolina*, that even then South Carolina held first place among the Southern states in the development of the cotton mill industry. He dated the development from 1790 when cotton mill machinery was built along English lines, and he gave authoritative proof of cotton goods being made then. However, he held that the real and lasting development of cotton mills in South Carolina started with the incorporation of Graniteville Cotton Mill in 1847, at Graniteville by William Gregg. However, five Greenville mills were established before that 1847 date. They were the Vardry McBee Mill, nine miles south of Greenville

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[3] *Ibid.*

on the Reedy River; the Berry Mill and the Weaver Mill north of Greenville, and the Batesville Cotton Mill and Listers Mill, ten miles east of Greenville on the Enoree River. The Batesville Mill, built by William Bates in 1830 and successfully operated into the twentieth century had the distinction of having the only woman cotton mill president in the state, Mrs. M. P. Gridley. [4]

Yet Gregg *was* responsible for securing the passage of state legislation which permitted the issuing of charters to mills or corporations as we now know them. Gregg fought for his charter, won it and the Act of Incorporation was passed. The result was the establishment of the first real factory in the Southern States, both as to the quality and quantity of the articles manufactured and which was, when Kohn wrote in 1907, "the most profitable in the State."

Kohn gives the date 1880 for the real beginning of the cotton mill industry in this area when extensive erection of large cotton mills with their accompanying villages began. In that year six mills were listed in Greenville County: Camperdown, Piedmont, Reedy River, Fork Shoals, Buena Vista, and Batesville.[5] By 1907 Greenville had fourteen cotton mills and one bleachery, the first in the South.[6]

Thus cotton mills began in South Carolina and have grown to such proportions that, according to the South Carolina Department of Labor and the South Carolina Textile Manufacturing Association, in June, 1969, "more than half of the wage earners in South Carolina are employed in the textile industry. The textile industry has gained and easily retained its rank as the predominant manufacturer in the state with 142,543 textile employees earning nearly 57% of the hourly wages paid by state manufacturing plants."[7]

Now, where does the mill village and its people fit into this story of magnificent achievement? We realize that it is the

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[4] August Kohn, *The Cotton Mills of South Carolina* (Charleston, S. C.: Dagget Printing Co., 1907) pp. 13-15.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 214-217.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 214-217.

[7] *Greenville News*, June 22, 1969.

people, both executives and operators, who have made all this possible so it should be of interest to all of us to look at the development of the mill villages in which most of the operators lived and worked. We must also seek to understand how the situation that caused the creation of the mill village has changed over the years until now when the village system has almost disappeared and new patterns of employer-employee relationships have developed.

The cotton mill village evolved from economic expediency. The early mills by necessity were built at shoals where water power was available but which were remote from existing towns or villages. The development of transportation was at such a level that workers had to be able to walk to their jobs. The cotton mill executives needed labor so villages were built near the mills to house the workers. The workers, for the most part tenant farmers leaving their worn out cotton patches, were used to being provided housing, food and clothing against future earnings, fuel, pasture for their cows, and pens for their pigs. Since this was expected the mill executive provided these services along with new features of communal living such as churches and schools. Thus, the cotton mill villages grew and made their contribution in adjusting the culturally deprived people of that day to the economic and technical changes going on in a world which had passed them by.

The mill village, although violently attacked by reformers during the early part of this century, and justly so in certain instances, when examined in retrospect over a period of a hundred years, was the basis of a number of very beneficial results in our industrial era. Certainly, it was an institution which was a means of moving a rural, deprived people into an industrial complex and an urban pattern of living. They developed, served their acculturation purpose for thousands of our disadvantaged people from rural and mountain areas, and are disappearing.

William Hayes Simpson in a 1948 study of textile communities, says "Wm. Gregg is credited with establishing at Graniteville the first mill village in the South. In 1849 this village covered 150 acres, contained two Gothic churches, an academy, a hotel, stores, and about 100 cottages belonging to the company and occupied by operatives. The houses varied in

size from three to nine rooms each, nearly all built on Gothic cottage order."[8] Gregg said in referring to this community:

> "We may really regard ourselves as the pioneers in developing the real character of the poor people in South Carolina. Graniteville is truly the home of the poor widow and helpless children, or for a family brought to ruin by a drunken, worthless father. Here they meet protection, are educated free of charge, and brought up to habits of industry under the care of intelligent men. The population of Graniteville is made up mainly from the poor of Edgefield, Barnwell and Lexington districts. From extreme poverty and want, they have become a thrifty, happy and contented people. When they were first brought together 79 out of 100 girls could neither read nor write and they were a by-word around the country; that reproach has long since been removed .... For the first time in their lives a majority of the employees had a domicile worthy of the name of home. Their moral and mental culture was receiving attention. The use of alcohol was not permitted nor was idleness. Good moral character was necessary for continued residence.[9]

Gregg's village ideas appealed to other early mill men who from the same economic expediency began building their own villages around their new mills. Each mill executive had his own architect, builders, and ideas, so the villages reflected the personalities of the founders, the variety of which can still be observed in the relics of the early Greenville County mill villages with their cottages, churches, and schools.

Kohn says, to these mill villages, as operators, came the finest body of people on earth doing similar work. The first employees were surplus agricultural labor in surrounding neighborhoods. When the local supply of labor was exhausted the mills sought labor in the nearby North Carolina mountains where the people were of the same stock, habits, and previous conditions and culture. Advertising dodgers were distributed and representatives went into the mountains to recruit workers. Workers came at first on a trial basis, but most of them stayed to make a new life for themselves and their children. These descendents of early English, Scotch, and German immigrants

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[8] William Hayes Simpson, *Southern Textile Communities, 1948* (n. p., n. d.) p. 25.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

had been isolated farmers living on sub-marginal lands. These were independent, hill and mountain people who now aroused themselves from agrarian lethargy, deserted their farms, and entered urgan industrial society. They had learned the discipline of the factory economy and had adjusted to working "all year round." For the first time these people were an economic force with cash money to spend and a contribution to make to the industrial growth of the State.[10]

For most of the new industrial workers fresh from the isolated areas, the village life was a step upward on the economic and social ladder. Thomas F. Parker, President of Monaghan Mill, described the mill village and its meaning to new workers in 1909:

> A visit to an average mill, and then to typical places from which its operatives came, including the barren sandhills and isolated mountain coves, would give most persons an entirely different understanding of the cotton mill's influence. Some large families who came to the mill have lived in cabins, which, with their surroundings, can be described as follows: one small room with a door, and possibly one window, both of which are kept closed during the winter and every night; the open fireplace for heat and cooking; a frying pan, coffee pot, and Dutch oven for cooking; and for furniture, rough beds, chairs and a table. Not a book is in the house or even a newspaper, and the whole family uses tobacco and perhaps whiskey; ambition there is none, and only a bare subsistence is sought. From the lack of occupation and mental interest the family spends a considerable part of its life in this room; the nearest neighbor is perhaps several miles distant, and the church and school, during the short periods they are open, are so remote as to be practically inaccessible. These conditions lead to dire poverty and disease, in extreme cases even causing clay eating.[11]

As the industry grew, in the early 1900's labor shortage became so acute that some mills even went further away from the area for help. At one time fifty Belgians were employed at the Monaghan Mill of Greenville and some German workers at Pelzer. However, for the most part, as observed in 1907 by Col. James L. Orr, President of the Piedmont Cotton Mills, "Everyone employed from the superintendent down, was born in the

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[10] Kohn, pp. 28-31.

[11] Thomas F. Parker, "The South Carolina Cotton Mill--A Manufacturer's View," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, VIII (October, 1909), 330.

Piedmont section and learned his business in the mills. They are different from 'the hands' formerly. They are more intelligent and therefore command the respect of others. Many advantages are enjoyed by them which cannot be had in sparsely settled localities."

At first the overseers, machinists and skilled operators came from the North, but after a few years natives of North and South Carolina began to take over these positions. Many of the superintendents worked their way to the top "through the mill."

The early village homes were very simple board houses with few conveniences. As new conveniences were introduced in the 1900's in the cities they were soon added to the village homes to keep the operators from moving. Electric lights replaced lamps, inside plumbing was installed, streets were paved, schools and churches were built, and health and recreational facilities, even adult education classes, were provided in many villages. The wages were low but were uniform in the area and the rents of the homes were low and varied according to the number of rooms.

The mill villages in Greenville County were for the most part much more attractive, and the cultural and welfare programs for the operators much more extensive than those of villages in the rest of the State. For example, the policies of Henry Pinckney Hammett, who had been a manager of the early Batesville Mill, builder of the Piedmont Manufacturing Company and later President of the Camperdown Mills at the Reedy River Falls, were widely copied. "His relations with his employees were so wisely paternalistic that his village [Piedmont] became the model for other mills and his plant became a nursery for the industrial revolution in the South. By the end of the century thirty-eight superintendents were 'graduates' of Hammett's mills."[12]

Greenville in the last one hundred years has grown from a rather raw town of about 8,000 people with 149 stores, seventeen bar rooms, two railroads and two Baptist Colleges, into the so-called Textile Center of the World - a rather large

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[12] Albert N. Sanders, "Greenville and the Southern Tradition," in *The Arts in Greenville, 1800-1960*, Alfred S. Reid, editor (Greenville, S. C.: Furman University, 1960), p. 139.

accomplishment - due almost entirely to the enterprising, far-seeing, diligent business leadership of not only the textile industry, but of the local entrepreneurs and business men. These leaders successfully unified community loyalty around the development of the cotton textile industry and sought and accepted the financial and leadership assistance from experts in the North and East. When the early mills were incorporated, it was a civic duty for local people to buy stock. When local money was exhausted, cotton agents and bankers in the North and East helped finance the plants.[13]

When the Textile Hall was opened in 1917, Greenville proudly proclaimed itself the Textile Center of the South, and in 1964 when the new Textile Hall was built it proclaimed itself the Textile Center of the World. Both claims were justified. In 1921 the New York *Commercial and Financial Chronicle* asked officers of the Southern Textile Industry to name the man who had made the most outstanding contribution to the development of the textile industry. Of fifteen nominated, three were from Greenville. They were Ellison Adger Smyth, Lewis W. Parker, and Henry Pinckney Hammett. Smyth received more votes than any of the fifteen and was proclaimed the "Dean of Southern Cotton Manufacturing." By 1922 the county had twenty-two cotton mills.[14] In 1969 Greenville became the Textile Center of the World when the International Textile Machinery show was held in Greenville's new Textile Hall. Fifty-seven foreign firms exhibited in the show. Three thousand three hundred and eighteen foreign visitors attended from seventy one foreign countries. Interesting to local people was the fact that practically all of the interpreters of four languages were provided from members of the Greenville International Club whose members for the most part are foreign industrialists and their staffs who make their homes in Greenville.

With this background, let us briefly examine our local mill village with its early amazing social and educational patterns.

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[13] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

Greenville owes (more than is recognized) its present social welfare and cultural status to the vision of Thomas F. Parker, who came to Greenville from Philadelphia in 1900 to become president of Monaghan Mill. Thomas Parker was a philanthropist with a long view, who was concerned over the mill operators and recognized not only their needs, but also the needs of the larger Greenville community. He did much to raise the welfare and the cultural level of understanding in the area by financing surveys of conditions and projects to demonstrate these needs and how they could be met. One of the best demonstrations was that of the welfare and cultural program developed in his Monaghan Mill villages.

Thomas Parker began his welfare program in 1906 by employing Lawrence Peter Hollis to develop and direct the first program. This outstanding welfare pioneer first organized the Monaghan Y. M. C. A. Later a broad recreation program, community athletics, a village visiting nurse and clinic and subsidized school buildings and teacher salaries followed. Religious life was encouraged by donations to church buildings and ministers' salaries. This pattern begun at Monaghan was followed in other villages.

A 1920 study reported that the mills of Greenville County were encouraging churches and building mill schools in a manner "not surpassed by any county in the state." Libraries or reading rooms, Y. M. C. A. and Y. W. C. A. buildings were in a number of villages while playgrounds, social workers and visiting nurses were found in "every mill community in the county so far as we are informed."[15] In 1923, through a cooperative effort of the mills on the west side of Greenville, the Parker School District was formed (named for Thomas F. Parker). In this way the education of the young in all the mill villages of the new district could be improved to enable the children to develop their best talents. Under district superintendent, L. P. Hollis, the experimental education work became nationally recognized. This is a good illustration of one of the cultural contributions of our mill villages.

Following World War I, as a visitor employed by the Home

[15] Guy A. Gullick, *Greenville County: Economic and Social* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1921), p. 35.

Service of the American Red Cross from 1919-1922, I visited the homes of our soldiers overseas, comforted and assisted those in many isolated mountain areas, the mill villages, small towns and in Greenville. During the flu epidemic I, with others, carried soup and fruit juices to many of these people. I saw conditions and could compare cultures. After the War, the Red Cross borrowed one of Thomas Parker's village nurses and established the first visiting nurses service for the county, predecessor of the Public Health nurses who came later.

In 1933 when choosing a subject for my Master's thesis in sociology, I chose to study a local cotton mill village. At that time Robert Staughton Lynd's study, *Middletown*,[16] was popular and community studies were in vogue, so my subject was accepted. I was delighted, as I knew all my Greenville friends would help me. My father assisted me in choosing a village which has now practically disappeared. It was typical of the area and I knew the president of the mill and his family, the superintendent, the principal of the school, the minister and the social worker, as well as my good friend, Mr. Hollis. The research was delightful. I was impressed, as always, with the kindliness which permeates our county. I was graciously received, not only by the mill executives and social workers, teachers and preachers, but by the housewives and school children who enthusiastically gave me their views and filled out my questionnaires. This, remember, was in 1933, just as the real pinch of the depression was being felt and the textile boom, from which the villages profited greatly, had passed. However, it was an ideal time to check the cultural advances made from that earlier period.

What had happened really to these people who, in the earlier period, came from the rural and mountain cabins? The major change was cultural and educational although the physical environment had also changed. A new generation had grown up in clean homes with electric lights and other electric conveniences, inside plumbing, available transportation for schooling and urban shopping and entertainment. The educational advantages were far superior to those in the rural areas as

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[16] Robert Staughton and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown, A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929).

were other cultural and recreational opportunities. Of course, there were those workers who could not compete, were forced out of the village and became problems for the social workers of Greenville. On the other hand the vast majority of the villagers profited from steady work, and many "graduated," as did Hammett's workers in Piedmont, into managers and leaders in the larger Greenville community. Many of the boys and girls attended college and never returned to the mills, but took their places in the outside world.[17] This mobility continues - new workers come in as the successful ones move out.

Success depends upon motivation and ability, and certainly the village schools have motivated the children toward higher goals. For example, the president of the mill in my study was born and reared in Greenville County and lived on a farm until he was nineteen when he moved to Greenville. There he was employed in a store and soon became a store owner. At fifty he launched into a new industry and built a cotton mill of which he remained president for thirty years. As the newspaper said of him at his death, "His career shows to what extent the personal ackground and integrity of the founders entered into the suc- ssful establishment of the textile industry in South Carolina." ıe superintendent of this mill was one of Hammett's men, who , a boy of nine started a doffer boy at the old Batesville Mill of which he later became superintendent. He lived in the mill village, worked with the people in the village with whom he was one, while his fellow citizen and employer lived in the town of Greenville and arranged for the financial management of the mills.[18]

The major problems of the early cotton mill villages, many of which were exaggerated, were those of child labor, long hours, health hazards, and low wages. These have largely been dissipated or solved by national and state legislation, some of which was proposed and approved by concerned textile executives. The cotton mill worker was included along with many other laborers in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. He received, through the textile code, and later legislation a forty-hour week, child labor was abolished, and a minimum scale of wages was

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[17] See Laura Smith Ebaugh, *A Study of a Mill Community in Greenville, S. C.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), *passim*.

[18] *Ibid.*

adopted which has steadily increased over the years. However, at the time the Federal government abolished child labor, only two and one-half percent of those employed in the cotton mills of the South were children. Child labor had, in other words, been abolished earlier.

Technological and scientific inventions, good roads, cheap means of transportation, plus instantaneous communications have created a new world for all people. There is no longer a need for a village around a textile plant. Today, if you drive around Greenville County, you can see the remains of the early villages around the older mills but on the hills in the rural areas you see the huge new plants surrounded, not by little villages, but by parking lots to care for hundreds of automobiles. The employees for the most part have matured culturally and economically when compared with their predecessors of the mill-village era. They are taking their places in the competitive world. They no longer need the crutch of village isolation to protect them in their transition from rural to urban life.

After examining our mill villages in retrospect, I think we can agree with Dr. George Brown Tindall in his evaluation of this Southern pattern of life when he said to the Furman University student body last year:

> . . . the capacity to master change depends upon a willingness to face and grapple with problems, open attitudes of mind that prepare one to tolerate dissent and analysis and rational discussion as a means to rational change. It depends above all upon a consciousness of change which recognizes that the South *does move* and that change is not a conspiracy against the region, but one of the abiding facts of life . . . . [He concludes] Yet one may hope that Southerners might come to envision a region that does not necessarily lose the integrity in the powers of change, but instead, might find its integrity if it can seize the challenge.[19]

I like to think that many Greenville leaders today are accepting this challenge and are planning with a long view for a better Greenville for all of us in the future.

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[19]George Brown Tindall "The Burden of Change," *Furman University Magazine*, XVII, No. 2 (May, 1969)

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