

Good Satisfied Help: Memory, Paternalism, and a North Carolina Textile Company Town

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2016 Henry Fowler Paper Competition

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4/18/16

Bynum as Textile Company Town

In 1894, the Moore family left their farm in rural Chatham County, North Carolina and relocated ten miles north in Bynum, a textile company town under the operation of J.M. Odell Manufacturing Company. Born in 1883, young Flossie Moore was just ten years old when she arrived at the mill with her mother and siblings. Flossie worked daily twelve hour shifts as a cotton spinner for eight years until she found a husband, took the name Durham, and turned to housekeeping and child-rearing. The sudden loss of Flossie's father to "locked bowels" (appendicitis) marked the final chapter in the family's Sisyphean struggle with agrarian life, which provided mere subsistence wages and demanded continuous, back-breaking labor.¹ Flossie recalled her father's role as the cornerstone of the family farm, saying, "He planted cotton and corn and wheat, too, and [...] after he died, it looked like we couldn't keep a-going on the farm."²

Unlike the family farm, the Bynum textile mill offered the prospect of secure wage labor. Frank Durham, son of Flossie Moore Durham, invoked Bynum's attractive cost of living as a reason that so many local farming families transitioned from farm to factory, asserting, "You could live for near about nothing with the house rent, you know. It weren't but \$1.25 every two weeks for a three-room house, and they were big rooms. That's mighty cheap rent."³ Flossie recalled,

¹ Interview with Lewis Durham by Brent D. Glass, August 15, 1976, H-006, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. p. 3.

² Oral History Interview with Flossie Moore Durham, September 2, 1976. Interview H-0066. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 1.

³ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 25.

We had a real good life over there on the hill. Every house was filled, and the people was all friendly and they was all nice. And Mr. Luther Bynum [founder of the mill] was looking after it, and he wouldn't have anybody over there that drank. Anybody got drinking, they left there right now. Didn't have no drinking and cutting up over there. Things was kept quiet and nice. And it was a good place over there to live.⁴

Indeed, Bynum remains today a quiet, pleasant community, a relic of a seemingly halcyon time.

But Flossie Moore Durham's memory reflects more than nostalgia for yesteryear or sentimentality for a cherished way of life. Flossie's oral history, like those of her neighbors, reveals how millworkers' yeomen identities interacted synergistically with the paternalistic presence of the town textile company. Millworkers such as Flossie Moore Durham left the family farm for Bynum and, in doing so, infused the small textile company town with yeomen values, customs, and social arrangements. Throughout the early twentieth century, workers' agrarian culture valorized J.M. Odell Manufacturing Company and influenced community power dynamics, labor and race relations, as well as worker memories of Bynum, promoting obedience to company authority, endurance to hardship, and, ultimately, communal tranquility.

Moreover, Bynum's small size, coupled with its unique yeomen identity, proved not only incongruent with the ideals of labor unionism but useful in perpetuating the J.M. Odell Manufacturing Company's authority over the Bynum community. Unlike many other North Carolina company towns, Bynum carries a peaceful, harmonious labor history, marking Bynum as a unique enclave of labor tranquility in an otherwise tumultuous region. Aspects of workers' hegemonic agrarian culture, such as religion, family traditions, and race, promoted the company's patriarchal authority over Bynum and engendered a strong suspicion towards unionism. Additionally, Bynum's small size placed it on the periphery of regional labor conflict

⁴ Oral History Interview with Flossie Moore Durham, September 2, 1976. Interview H-0066. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 12-13.

and unionization efforts. Bynum never experienced a single instance of significant labor conflict during its one-hundred-year tenure as a company town.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, company towns were fixtures of American industry, particularly in the South, hailed by advocates as being economically efficient as well as morally progressive.⁵ The company town might be considered a literal copy of a public township with the exception that the town is constructed around a central industrial plant or factory. The management and owners of the factory double as managers and owners of the company town offering utilities, housing, commercial establishments, and other services commonly rendered or supported by a public entity to wage-earning employees. The company town constitutes a mirror image of the public village, sharing the same dimensions and characteristics. Yet, as a place in which all facets of life are in some way controlled, influenced, or managed by a private corporate entity, the company town might also be considered the antithesis of the American ideal. Historian Hardy Green writes,

A company town seems necessarily to be a place where one business exerts a Big Brother-like grip over the population — controlling or even taking the place of government, collecting rents on company-owned housing, dictating buying habits, (possibly at the company store), even administering where people worship and how they may spend their leisure time.⁶

A public community controlled by a private, profit-seeking industrial entity, the company town is a complex amalgamation of social interactions, power dynamics, and moral quandaries, conflating private and public life, blurring the line between labor and leisure, the factory and the home, the sphere of work and the sphere of the community.

⁵ Green, Hardy. *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills that Shaped the American Economy*. n.p.: New York: Basic Books, 2010. *Fintel Library's Catalog*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 21, 2016). pp. 28-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

According to Green, the American company town has usually adhered to one of two models: overt exploitation of workers for the benefit of the corporate bottom line and a more benevolent approach, yet nonetheless paternalistic, wherein the company combined community interests and employee well-being with financial commitments to shareholders and the corporate bottom line.⁷ Green notes that these two models varied according to geographic region and industry. The coal company towns of Appalachia reflect the first of the two models. Historically, coal companies were vigilant acolytes of exploitation, intimidation of workers, and, in the worst instances, violence.⁸

In other regions, such as the Southern Piedmont, textile companies followed the latter model, fusing economic interests with a kind of paternalism motivated not by an amoral commitment to economic productivity but a seemingly genuine interest in employee health and satisfaction.⁹ Concerning this second model, Green notes, “These utopian towns were and are characterized by [...] facilities for leisure, education, and cultural enrichment, and comfortable dwellings for managers and workers.”¹⁰ However, beneath this progressive veil of company thoughtfulness and charity rests a subtle kind of paternalism, a gentle authoritarianism. Green asserts that corporate supervision of the company town often resulted “in a watchfulness toward the citizenry on the part of the company overlords: Such guardians have tended to favor tidiness

⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁸ Interested readers are advised to consult Alessandro Portelli’s *They Say in Harlan County* for a vivid portrait of the labor histories of coal company towns.

⁹ The online format of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines paternalism as, “a system under which an authority undertakes to supply needs or regulate conduct of those under its control in matters affecting them as individuals as well as in their relations to authority and to each other.” Paternalism reflects a dynamic wherein an authoritative individual or body protects and provides for members of a subordinate group while, in doing so, limiting the subordinate group’s responsibility or freedom of choice.

¹⁰ Ibid.

in housekeeping, sobriety, and oftentimes regular religious observance.”¹¹ Such was the case in Bynum, as readers will see, where the company superintendent used his role as Sunday School teacher to promote values favorable to the company, such as temperance and obedience. It is within the latter of Green’s two models that Bynum, and the memories of its residents, should be considered.

Using oral histories collected from Bynum residents, this paper marks a departure from existing historiography on the history of textile labor in North Carolina. Examinations of the state’s larger, more economically significant company towns dominate the contemporary landscape of historical literature. Timothy Vanderburg’s monograph *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*, Annette Cox’s article, “The Loray, North Carolina’s ‘Million Dollar Mill’: The ‘Monstrous Hen’ of Southern Textiles,” and Dr. John Selby’s “Better to Starve in the Shade Than in the Factory: Labor Protest in High Point, North Carolina, in the Early 1930’s” stand as prime illustrations of this point. Each of these studies focuses on unionism, worker suppression, and the more tumultuous moments of North Carolina’s historic industrial epicenters. Other, broader labor histories such as Hardy Green’s *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills that Shaped the American Economy* and David Roediger’s *Our Own Time: a History of American Labor and the Working Day* echo a similar focus, exploring the major events and historical themes of large textile company towns, particularly the 1934 General Textile Strike and the decades of cyclical antagonism between beleaguered textile union organizers and powerful textile barons. The resulting portrait is one of textile magnates and labor exploitation within the walls of massive, city-like company towns. Lost is a labor history that exists in places lacking episodes of intense labor conflict.

¹¹ Ibid.

I located my oral history sources through the digital archives of the Southern Oral History Project and selected my narrators in an effort to reflect the authentic demographics of the historical Bynum company town. The selected oral histories represent persons who were either born in Bynum or moved to Bynum from the neighboring Chatham County agrarian community. All of the oral history narrators in this paper, with the exception of Joe Glazer, worked for J.M. Odell Manufacturing Company in some capacity — the occupations represented by narrators range from machine-washer to mill superintendent. I deliberately chose oral histories which I believe reflect the close-knit family relations of Bynum and its surrounding region. Many of my narrators share kinship, a testament to the importance of family in the Bynum community. Due to the extensive web of agrarian familial relations linking millworkers by blood and marriage, Bynum's community history might be considered, to a limited degree, a family history.

Central to my research was the pursuit of balanced analysis not only in terms of Bynum residents' class but in terms of gender and race as well. Thus, I consulted the oral histories of both male and female narrators. My paper contains seven central narrators — three women and four men. Given that the Bynum mill was a segregated institution during the years in which I focus my analysis, barring persons of color from meaningful participation in Bynum community life, all seven narrators are white.

This paper utilizes the research of historian John Bodnar in order to explore the role of agrarian culture and identity in the formation of Bynum residents' memories. In his insightful article "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker," Bodnar

argues that memory is a fluid, social process.¹² Individuals shape their memories by engaging in a dialectic with other individuals or institutions, corroborating their personal narratives via consultation and revision. In his analysis of oral histories from workers at a Studebaker factory in South Bend, Indiana, Bodnar demonstrated how Studebaker Corporation, as a hegemonic institution, influenced workers' personal conceptions of themselves.¹³ Bodnar found that autoworkers' memories of their careers at Studebaker employed themes, metaphors, and images congruent with those used in Studebaker public relations campaigns and advertising, resolving that memory "serve[s] the needs of dominant institutions as much as, or more than, those of individuals."¹⁴ Hegemonic institutions — the Studebaker plant in Bodnar's case and the dual institutions of the textile mill and millworkers' yeomen identities in the case of Bynum — play a decisive role in the formation of memory and identity. This paper represents an effort to transplant John Bodnar's notions of memory and identity from the context of Indiana autoworkers to the context of textile workers in the North Carolina Piedmont. I analyze Bynum's oral histories through the lens of narrators' agrarian culture, the definitive hegemonic institution of the Bynum mill community.

A review of Bynum's history from the turn of the twentieth century until the dawn of the post-World War II national economic boom using residents' oral histories reveals that smaller, more rural textile communities experienced the company town in a decidedly different way than their larger counterparts. Bynum residents fulfilled a dual role as denizens of the community and laborers in the town factory and recalled memories of paternalism and life in the Bynum

¹² Bodnar, John. "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker." *Journal Of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989): 1201-1221. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 1, 2016). p. 1202-1203.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 1219.

company town that, for better or for worse, invoke a more complex image than the existing historiography suggests. Residents at once invoked disdain for work in the mill while describing a close-knit, harmonious community, adducing the joys of worker-management camaraderie on the mill floor. Residents often lamented the deplorable level of wages and the long shift hours, yet celebrated the generosity and kindness of their supervisors and superintendent, defending even the highest echelons of company management. While other textile communities experienced moments of intense labor conflict, going so far as to establish unions, organize strikes, and even engage in violence with company agents and operatives, Bynum maintained a relatively harmonious stasis. Millworkers remained at their looms and spinners, suspicious of labor unions, and generally content with the status quo. This paper attempts to explain this history.

A combination of cultural and systemic factors conspired to shape Bynum into a unique enclave, free of the visible labor conflicts that plagued other, larger textile mills in North Carolina. Bynum workers' retained their yeoman identities despite moving into an industrial context, supporting a harmonious stasis between workers and the mill company as well as a web of worker-interdependence within the Bynum community. This complex network of interactions proved economically empowering for workers and their families, whose skills in gardening, animal husbandry, and bartering provided an alternative to mill income. Values such as obedience towards paternalistic authority, loyalty to one's community, and stoicism in the face of hardship, all vestiges of the pre-mill, agrarian society of Chatham County, equipped millworkers with the abilities and beliefs necessary in order to tolerate and even thrive within the rhythms and demands of textile mill labor. Bynum's small size as a company town prevented labor conflict and fostered upward mobility within the mill, creating a generally congenial,

neighborly atmosphere that transcended the memories of Bynum residents. Consideration of these factors illuminates Bynum as an outlier in the history of the company town and, consequently, an outlier in the general labor history of North Carolina's textile industry.

The Field Meets the Factory

Welfare capitalists of the nineteenth century advanced the company town as a morally sound economic model, heralding a new era in labor-management relations. A shining example of this particular breed of industrialism can be found in the history of Pullman, a nineteenth century Chicago company town. Industrialist Robert Pullman, maker of the Pullman sleeping railroad car, created his namesake company town on 4,000 acres of land outside Chicago, crafting a domain where workers would be protected from corruptive agents and deleterious institutions, namely alcohol and the saloon.¹⁵ Believing that the aesthetic of the factory environment strongly influenced worker productivity, obedience, and moral character, Pullman deemed the maintenance of clean and modern facilities a top managerial priority.¹⁶

Other industrialists emulated Pullman's example, adopting the paternalistic model and public policies of the company town and pioneering a vision of economic prosperity founded on progressive notions of labor welfare.¹⁷ Historian Bart Dredge notes that by the end of the nineteenth century "white workers were drawn by the tens of thousands to the cotton mills in the South, many no doubt induced by promises by labor scouts of a more benevolent environment

¹⁵ Hardy Green, *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills that Shaped the American Economy*. New York: Basic Books, 2010, *Fintel Library's Catalog*. pp. 28-30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Dredge, Bart. "Contradictions of Corporate Benevolence: Industrial Libraries in the Southern Textile Industry, 1920-1945." *Libraries & The Cultural Record* 43, no. 3 (August 2008): 308-326. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 16, 2016).

than could be found elsewhere.”¹⁸ However, Dredge adds, “the benevolence came at a cost — and the cost was intentional, as textile officials attempted to create obedient, passive, and loyal workers.”¹⁹ The company town’s Orwellian atmosphere served as a counterweight to its promise of economic security.

According to Bess Beatty, this benevolent environment stemmed from, “a conscious design by mill owners and their supporters and a natural product of their sense of society and their place within it.”²⁰ Textile industry capitalists echoed the semantics of antebellum slave owners in rationalizing their authority over their wage laborers, invoking ideals of class responsibility, religious duty, and social progress.²¹ In this way, textile industrialists convinced not only workers and investors of their virtuous ends but satisfied their own moral compasses by honoring a collective sense of *noblesse oblige*.²² Textile industrialists assured working class Southerners, steeped as a group in generations of agrarian culture and tradition and collectively weary of industrialization, that the advent of the factory, rather than threatening their culture, values, or livelihoods, would work synergistically between these three facets, improving life for all.²³ However, despite industrialists’ ostensibly altruistic motives lay an intent to control almost

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bart Dredge, “Contradictions of Corporate Benevolence: Industrial Libraries in the Southern Textile Industry, 1920-1945,” *Libraries & The Cultural Record* 43, no. 3 (August 2008): 308-326.

²⁰ Beatty, Bess. “Textile Labor in the North Carolina Piedmont: Mill Owner Images and millworker Response, 1830-1900.” *Labor History* 25, no. 4 (Fall 84 1984): 485-503. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 16, 2016). p. 487.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The French phrase *noblesse oblige* asserts that those who wield power and privilege must fulfill certain charitable obligations to members of lower, less-privileged groups or classes.

²³ Ibid.

every aspect of workers' lives. Historian Timothy Vanderburg notes that, "Deference and fear [...] were key elements of paternalism in both [the plantation and the company town.]"²⁴

It was precisely the allure of this kind of benevolence and economic security in the form of wage labor and a company-provided home that propelled the Moores and other rural farming families across Chatham County into the company town of Bynum. The families of Bynum residents John Wesley Snipes and Carrie Lee Gerringer similarly migrated to the banks of the Haw, trading life as tenant farmers for a factory wage and a mill house, leaving agrarian subsistence for industrial security. For John Wesley Snipes it was the scourge of the boll weevil that sent his family to Bynum from the adjacent farming community of Baldwin. Snipes recalled,

The last year I raised four bales of cotton, and I carried a five-hundred-pound bale of cotton to Chapel Hill [to trade] and it brought me twenty-five dollars: five cents a pound. The boll weevil hit. And I had four or five bales at four and five cents. And I told my wife, I said, 'Never will I work on the farm and spend maybe seventy-five or a hundred dollars for fertilizer, and it'd take the whole year for me work' so I quit.²⁵

On Thanksgiving Day 1929, just a month after the devastating collapse of the national economy on Black Thursday, Snipes moved to Bynum with his family. The following night, Snipes reported for work at the mill and began his first shift. His wife, who had worked alongside John Wesley in the cotton fields, returned to her husband's side a few days later, herself a convert to industrial labor.²⁶

Economic hardship figured prominently into the rise of textile labor for residents of Chatham County. As historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes in *Like a Family: The Making of a*

²⁴ Vanderburg, Timothy W. *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013. *Project MUSE*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 16, 2016). p. 3.

²⁵ Oral History Interview with John W. Snipes, November 20, 1976. Interview H-0098-1. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. pp. 11-17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Southern Textile World, “Financial distress brought worry and pain. Being trapped in a cycle of debt was more than some men could bear.”²⁷ Like the Snipeses, the families of the Moores, Durhams, and Gerringers abandoned their farms and turned to the benevolence of the Bynum company town, where the J.M. Odell Manufacturing Company offered cheap rent in exchange for loyalty and labor. When asked if most families working in the Bynum mill came from agrarian life, Frank Durham, a lifetime resident of Bynum, whose own family left their agrarian homestead for the mill, recalled,

Yes, about all there was here come in from the farms originally, and they would just learn how to work in the mill, because it was better than farming for a lot of them. I mean for just sharecropping. A man that owned his own farm, he was all right. He done pretty good. There wasn't nothing to nothing, though; as far as making any money, no. You'd just labor, and you could make a living; that was just about all, and a mighty poor one at that.²⁸

For Frank Durham and many other local farmers, the choice was simple:

Mills or a farm. There weren't nothing to the farm neither. Noways like it is now. A little old family farm, just about all they did was raise enough for them and sell enough to buy their coffee and stuff like that that they needed, flour or whatever. They raised their own flour, mostly.²⁹

While a farmer was sure to face a life of uncertainty and hardship, millworkers enjoyed a more financially rewarding and consistent existence. The only precondition for a company house was a worker's labor for and loyalty to the company, which workers eagerly advanced. Durham added, “If you lived in a mill house, you'd have to work in the mill. Because they near about furnished

²⁷ Korstad, Robert Rodgers, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, and Mary Murphy. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1900. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 16, 2016). p. 8

²⁸ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid*,

them for nothing. Near about nothing.”³⁰ The company supplied workers’ households with most every important accommodation except one: the company did not provide domestic workers or, as Durham called them, “the help,” who were often drawn from the local black community to work for managers and wage workers alike.³¹ If a wage-earning family desired such an accommodation, Durham recalled, “they had to have their own help then.”³²

Frank Durham’s recollection of black domestic workers in Bynum highlights an important aspect of America’s general labor history, which, though present in Bynum’s history, went largely undiscussed by residents. Regardless of their position in the mill, Bynum residents enjoyed the benefits of what labor historians David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch called “whiteness-as-management.”³³ Though white millworkers lived in subordination to J.M. Odell Manufacturing, the Bynum mill superintendent, and the mill general manager, their ability to hire the local black community as domestic help insured that they would always be superior in terms of authority and prestige than at least one other group within Chatham County society. The security and authority which Bynum’s racial power differential offered poor white workers helps to account for the many favorable memories of millwork and community life. Since white millworkers frequently served in the capacity of boss over their neighbors of color, they never saw themselves as objects of oppression and enjoyed a limited degree of authority, which helped mitigate any disenchantment with the mill company which might have otherwise developed.

³⁰ Ibid, 36-37.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Roediger, David R., and Elizabeth D. Esch. *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. P. 108.

Bynum as Sanctuary

That the Bynum mill resembled a kind of savior for Chatham County's farming families helps to explain, at least in part, the sense of loyalty and gratitude which many millworkers expressed in their oral histories. Carrie Lee Gerringer, who moved to Bynum in the 1920's and experienced the company town as both a mother, homemaker, and wage-earner conveyed indebtedness and gratitude in her oral history, saying, "we was real lucky" throughout her interview.³⁴ Residents frequently emphasized the decency and fairness of the company management, embodied in the person of John London, company general manager from 1931 until 1964, a period which residents collectively acknowledged as the zenith of Bynum's company town existence. Indeed, many narrators offered praise to London as a "good man to work for."³⁵

While many farming families were ultimately driven to seek economic refuge in Bynum, an industrial enclave in an otherwise agrarian locale, Flossie Moore Durham's oral history demonstrates that Bynum was not a distant, alien environ to local agrarian families. The Bynum cotton mill had acted as a focal point for local commerce since its construction in 1872. Flossie remembers, "they had a good blacksmith's shop right down there in the bottom, like. On down a little farther was the cotton gin, and on down a little farther then was the grist mill."³⁶ Farmers made use of Bynum's industrial infrastructure for their own agrarian purposes, milling corn,

³⁴ Oral History Interview with Carrie Lee Gerringer, August 11, 1979. Interview H-0077. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. p. 20.

³⁵ Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 7.

³⁶ Oral History Interview with Flossie Moore Durham, September 2, 1976. Interview H-0066. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 4.

ginning cotton, and outfitting their horses, mules, and farming implements with the help of the Bynum blacksmith.³⁷ When the time came for destitute agrarian families to leave the farm, Bynum's established presence as a center for commerce in the local community offered a kind of consolation and reassurance.

As more and more agrarian families turned to millwork, Bynum began to reflect the identities of its new residents. The transition from agrarian to industrial life was gradual and, ultimately, only partial for many families. The Moores, Durhams, and Snipeses carried the skills, traditions, customs, and possessions of their agrarian lives into their new life as wage-earning mill employees, retaining their yeoman identities. "We're all country people," Flossie recollected of Bynum's workers and their families.³⁸ The Moore's brought pigs, cattle, and chickens to Bynum, supplementing their mill earnings with what returns might be brought from gardening and livestock, continuing their generations-old agrarian traditions if only in a smaller, more limited capacity.³⁹ Frank Durham recalled his family's livestock in Bynum:

We had a cow, and we had hogs and we had chickens; all that had to be looked after. They raised them all the time. Had a gang of chickens. We always had plenty of eggs and meat and milk at home. They kept two cows. Papa sometimes had two or three cows. He had a pasture, and he would buy them out in the neighborhood and around.

Similarly, Carrie Lee Gerringer recalled how the company town resembled an intersection between two ways of life, agrarian and industrial. In addition to working for wages in the mill,

³⁷ De Natale, Douglas Paul, "Bynum: The Coming of Mill Village Life to a North Carolina County." (January 1, 1985). Paper AAI8603629. pp. 12-13.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

³⁹ Interview with Lewis Durham by Brent D. Glass, August 15, 1976, H-0068, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. pp. 58-59.

Gerringer's husband Bill worked "odd jobs [...] in the country."⁴⁰ In this way, Bynum residents preserved generations old ties to their agrarian ways and the local pre-mill farming community.

Equally as important as its promise of economic security was the Bynum mill's system of family labor, which allowed husbands to work alongside wives, children alongside their parents (recall the anecdote of John Wesley Snipes' move to Bynum). By the dawn of textile industrialization in the late nineteenth century, farming in Chatham County had been a family practice for generations and the Bynum mill extended to the local agrarian community working arrangements which closely mirrored those to which they were already intimately accustomed. According to historians Robert Korstad and Jacquelyn Hall,

[Mill owners] promoted factory work as a refuge for impoverished women and children from the countryside, hired family units rather than individuals, and required labor of at least one worker per room as a condition for residence in a mill-owned house.⁴¹

Millwork advertised in this way appealed strongly with local farming families and the Bynum mill's allowance of family labor comprises yet another significant instance of a dovetailing between workers' pre-industrial traditions and their new lives in the company town.

As Bynum's residents carried their livestock into their new, industrial lives, so too did they carry the yeoman work ethic, conservative familial values, and religious fervor. These tenets of Southern agrarian culture proved vital in workers' struggles to meet the demands of millwork and acclimate to a new labor structure comprised of machines, wages, and paternalistic company authority. On the farm, the family father-figure reserved control over all aspects of life and demanded hard work from his wife and children in order to make a viable livelihood. Residents

⁴⁰ Oral History Interview with Carrie Lee Gerringer, August 11, 1979. Interview H-0077.

Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. pp. 37-38.

⁴¹ Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, Robert Korstad, and James Leloudis. "Cotton Mill People: Work, Community, and Protest in the Textile South, 1880-1940." *American Historical Review* 91, no. 2 (April 1986): 245. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 26, 2016). p. 249.

recalled childhoods spent under unwavering paternal authority, which ultimately prepared them for life as subordinate millworkers. As one example, Vernon Durham recalled how his father used a razor strop as an instrument of corporal punishment.⁴² Concerning his parents, Frank Durham recalled, “they had it under control all right [...] we knew to do what they said.”⁴³ Like the agrarian patriarch over the yeomen family, the factory superintendent wielded unquestioned authority over company wage laborers, and Bynum workers found little difficulty in substituting the former with the latter.

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, eminent labor historian E.P. Thompson notes how English industrialists often employed religion as a disciplinary device against the working class during the industrial revolution.⁴⁴ Thompson notes a certain “correspondence” between the tenets of Methodism and capitalists’ efforts to form a more disciplined and obedient workforce during the early nineteenth century.⁴⁵ To the benefit of English capitalists, “God’s curse over Adam, when expelled from the Garden of Eden, provided irrefutable doctrinal support as to the blessedness of hard labour, poverty, and sorrow.”⁴⁶ The same could be argued for Bynum throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Mill managers channeled workers’ religious devotion into labor obedience. The fruit of English proletarian religion, generations of Methodist conviction accompanied agrarian families into the Bynum company town, emphasizing self-denial, heavenly reward, and encouraging

⁴²Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 36.

⁴³ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 39.

⁴⁴ Smelser, Neil J. 1966. Review of *The Making of the English Working Class. History and Theory* 5 (2). [Wesleyan University, Wiley]: 213–17. doi:10.2307/2504519. p. 214.

⁴⁵ Thompson, E. P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. n.p.: New York, Pantheon Books [1964, c1963], 1964. *Fintel Library's Catalog*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 10, 2016). p. 365.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

meekness and submission to authority.⁴⁷ It was perhaps because of these precise principles that the mill company eagerly encouraged workers to maintain their pre-industrial religious traditions. The community church was a focal point for social functions and community meetings and the mill superintendent enjoyed authority over residents' spirituality as supervisor of weekly Sunday School.⁴⁸ The degree to which labor and religious life merged in Bynum is nowhere more evident than in the close proximity of the superintendent's residence to Bynum's singular church, a Methodist chapel. The two remain a stone's throw apart even today.

Although residents held favorable memories of the Bynum company town and perceived J.M. Odell Manufacturing Company as an economic liberator, memories of millwork itself generally lacked the same ardor and affection. The same narrators who expressed attachment and love for the general Bynum community and the mill company community, the two being one in workers' memories, advanced an explicit disdain for millwork, recalling a work environment that was arguably exponentially more dangerous than anything which might be encountered on a Chatham County tenant farm or sharecropping operation. Beyond the stifling heat and cacophony of machines, residents recalled dust as the signature affliction of work in a textile mill. Frank Durham remembered the dust in a way which might be expected of coal miners rather than millworkers, saying,

Oh, it's terrible. I mean in the air it is. When I was coming along up and for a long time, that was all in the air. It's a wonder I can breathe, but somehow or another it didn't affect me like it did some folks. [...] But it just killed some folks. They had to get out. Couldn't stand it.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Douglas Paul De Natale, "Bynum: The Coming of Mill Village Life to a North Carolina County," (January 1, 1985). Paper AAI8603629. pp. 11-12.

⁴⁸ Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, Robert Korstad, and James Leloudis. "Cotton Mill People: Work, Community, and Protest in the Textile South, 1880-1940." *American Historical Review* 91, no. 2 (April 1986): 245. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 26, 2016). p. 250.

⁴⁹ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 17.

Workers' tobacco smoking habits, a carry-over from their agrarian existence as hands in the tobacco fields of Chatham County, augmented the mill dust's antagonistic character, and lung afflictions ran unchecked in Bynum.⁵⁰

During Vernon Durham's time as a worker the mill management kept the workrooms humid so as to keep the machinery functional and the textile fibers strong and quality. Consequently, workers spent ten to twelve-hours per day in thick dust at 80% humidity.⁵¹ Flossie Moore Durham cited the company management's allowance of a water bucket in the mill as evidence of the company's lenience and concern for its workers' well-being, asserting that workers could get water, "whenever you wanted to."⁵² Yet Flossie's description of the water station might be seen as evidence of company negligence rather than responsibility Flossie recalled that the water was kept in an open bucket on the mill floor, vulnerable to airborne dust and lint. Millworkers had to undertake special care in ladling their drinking water, handling the dipper as a kind of filter between the thick, soggy lint and the soiled water.⁵³

Similar conditions endured in other textile mills, marking Bynum as just one of many North Carolina sweatshops. The company town of Kannapolis, which rests just one hundred miles southwest of Bynum, housed the massive Cannon Mills, a behemoth of a textile factory. Run under the direction of the Cannon family, prominent New South industrialists, Cannon Mills exhibited the same fundamental social and spatial structure as Bynum. The company reserved

⁵⁰ Ibid, 18.

⁵¹ Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 3.

⁵² Oral History Interview with Flossie Moore Durham, September 2, 1976. Interview H-0066. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 16.

⁵³ Ibid.

supreme authority, offering workers wage labor, housing, and a host of other services such as educational, commercial, and even athletic facilities.⁵⁴ Although Bynum's factory conditions and paternalistic structure mirrored Cannon Mills, textile workers within the two communities responded in separate ways to their shared surroundings. Bynum remained throughout its history an enclave of worker obedience, rejecting unionism and organized labor agitation while Cannon Mills, like other large textile mills, experienced repeated instances of labor conflict.

In the years following World War I, workers in Kannapolis began to feel resentment concerning mill founder James Cannon when the company cut wages and decreased the work week. Historian Timothy Vanderburg writes, "The reciprocity and respect between management and labor that workers perceived were part of Cannon's type of paternalism had been broken by management."⁵⁵ When Cannon Mills workers began to organize as members of the United Textile Workers Union (UTW), James Cannon ordered that known union-sympathizers be locked out of the mill. This antagonistic dynamic between workers and company managers in Kannapolis would continue for years, playing out as a perpetual cycle of worker upheaval and suppression. Workers organized, walked out on strike, and organized picket lines while the Cannon family adhered to tactics of violence and intimidation in order to maintain the signature paternalistic authority of the company town.⁵⁶ At Cannon Mills' plant in Concord, a township directly adjacent to Kannapolis, more than three hundred workers walked off the job in the 1934 General Textile Strike, one of the largest textile strikes in history. Vanderburg describes how the strike in Concord turned violent,

⁵⁴ That the names of company towns served as an extension of their founders' identities -- the Cannons in the case of Kannapolis and the Bynum family in the case of Bynum -- signifies the heights of paternalistic authority and the extent to which mill owners perceived their authority over workers.

⁵⁵ Timothy W. Vanderburg, *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013, p. 49.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 95.

[Strikers] crossed the lines established by the National Guard near the plant entrance. While troops attempted to move the crowd away from the mill's gates, a scuffle broke out. One striker stabbed a guardsman in the back and several police officers sustain injuries in the melee. The sheriff arrested four leaders of the riot.⁵⁷

In contrast to workers in Kannapolis and Concord, who experienced a tenuous, sometimes violent dynamic with the Cannon Mills company, workers in Bynum recalled no such feelings of resentment, nor any will to unionize or even challenge the established order of power dynamics within the mill. Coming from a life of tenant farming and subsistence agriculture, millworkers in Bynum were grateful simply to have access to water on the job, even if the water was covered in thick textile lint. Never mind that mill work was hard and dirty. Farm labor had been equally as grueling. Just as importantly, farm life did not furnish the financial guarantees of the mill floor. Residents' disparaging recollections of millwork stand not only as evidence of the demanding, hostile textile factory environment, but as testament to the endurance and hardiness which millworkers developed on the farm and carried into the factory. Concerning the stifling dust and the thick gobs of lint in workers' drinking water, Flossie humbly submitted, "We didn't think nothing about it."⁵⁸

Bynum and the Monstrous Hens

The Bynum mill and its surrounding community comprised a humble, sparsely populated locale, especially when compared to the massive Cannon Mills in Kannapolis as well as other North Carolina textile communities such as High Point and Gastonia. A 1927 review of the North Carolina textile industry by geographer Jefferson Bynum helps to furnish an idea of the

⁵⁷ Timothy W. Vanderburg, *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013. p. 95.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

state and scope of textile mills in the early twentieth century.⁵⁹ The report provides an exhaustive list of ninety-seven textile mills in North Carolina and charts the expansion of the state textile industry since the start of the nineteenth century, listing the location of each major mill and the decade of its construction. While the Bynum mill was active and profitable in its own right, the report reveals that it was simply not a significant part of the state textile industry. Indeed, the report does not even mention the Bynum mill, establishing Bynum as an outlier from North Carolina's other textile company towns in terms of size and economic significance.⁶⁰ A photographic comparison of the Bynum mill with the Cannon Mill company town in Kannapolis provides a true sense of Bynum's size relative to other, more significant company towns (Appendix A). Bynum's characteristically small size accounts at least partially for residents' peaceful, sentimental memories.

In larger North Carolina textile communities such as Kannapolis, Gastonia, and High Point, workers experienced a higher degree of alienation from the mill company management. In contrast, detachment and alienation were altogether absent in the memories of Bynum residents who provided oral histories. In Kannapolis, the sheer size of the company town and the scope of paternalistic services rendered therein, which included facilities for education, recreation, and health care, in addition to company-provided housing, required that the company retain a higher degree of authority and control than that which was found in Bynum. Unlike Kannapolis, Bynum offered fewer, more modest amenities and allowed workers to take breaks from their work if they

⁵⁹ Whether or not Jefferson Bynum was of any kin to the Bynum family of Chatham County is unknown to the author of this piece but not an impossibility, especially given the complex web of family relations formed by generations of communal intermarriage in Chatham County, which sits adjacent to Orange County and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where Jefferson Bynum worked as a geographer.

⁶⁰ Bynum, Jefferson. 1928. "Piedmont North Carolina and Textile Production". *Economic Geography* 4 (3). [Clark University, Wiley]: 232–40. doi:10.2307/140294. p. 238.

were up to speed on production quotas.⁶¹ In Gastonia, the Loray Mill, an imposing multi-story brick complex set on thirteen acres of land, became the scene for intense labor violence following a clash between Communist Party-affiliated strikers and company agents.⁶² By the dawn of the 1930's, the Loray company town boasted "613 worker dwellings, six boarding houses, two stores, a club room, a community house, a nurses' home, and twelve miscellaneous buildings."⁶³

Historian Annette Cox notes that the Loray's sprawling, almost hyper-industrial environment fostered worker alienation and disillusionment with the company town model.⁶⁴ Additionally, labor historian David Roediger argues that the Loray's absentee ownership under the Rhode Island-based Manville-Jenkes Corporation augmented and catalyzed existing worker frustration, leading to striking conditions; 90% of the Loray Mill's 2,200 employees walked off the mill floor in 1929 to go on strike against wages.⁶⁵ Likewise, the High Point Hosiery Mills' mammoth size made the plant a target for professional, non-local UTW-affiliated organizers, who embarked upon an extensive campaign of labor organizing and anti-company agitation in the 1920s and 30s.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Timothy W. Vanderburg, *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013, p. 20.

⁶² Cox, Annette. "The Loray, North Carolina's "Million Dollar Mill": The "Monstrous Hen" of Southern Textiles." *North Carolina Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (July 2012): 241-275. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 16, 2016). P. 241.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 245.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 243.

⁶⁵ Roediger, David R., and Philip Sheldon Foner. *Our own time: a history of American labor and the working day*. n.p.: New York: Greenwood Press, 1989. *Fintel Library's Catalog*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 22, 2016) pp. 219-220.

⁶⁶ Selby, John G. 1987. "'Better to Starve in the Shade Than in the Factory": Labor Protest in High Point, North Carolina, in the Early 1930s". *The North Carolina Historical Review* 64 (1). North Carolina Office of Archives and History: 43-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23518462>. p. 47.

In contrast, Bynum's small size as a community and mill meant both that lower-level management positions in Bynum were occupied by members of the local community rather than outsiders and that company management could extend a higher degree of leniency and freedom to workers. At the close of the nineteenth century, the Bynum mill workforce hovered at a mere 350 people—the entire population of Baldwin township, the region under which the Bynum census has historically been recorded, was itself belittled by the Loray's titanic stature.⁶⁷ In Bynum, the ranks of the foremen and bosses frequently consisted of men who had worked their way up from machine-operating positions. Both Vernon and Frank Durham climbed from menial machinist positions to mill superintendent. Following their promotion to a higher rank within the company, managers, superintendents, and foremen still had friends, neighbors, and, in some cases, wives working on the mill floor as operators. Consequently, a bridge remained between company management and the lower-level workers and the face of the company management, of overseers and bosses, was familiar to the workers of lesser status. Bosses lived in the community, and were accessible individuals, who, as proxies of the company management, gave the mill company a personable, familiar face as well.

While Cannon millworkers organized to combat broad institutional changes such as wage reductions and worktime reductions, Bynum workers came together in solidarity over community matters which had more to do with general community matters than labor ideology or class conflict. Frank Durham recalled how one of his uncles, who held a supervising position at the mill, was forced to leave Bynum after news of an extramarital affair came to light. Durham asserted, "He got caught [...] and he had to leave here. Or he did. He left here. The rest of the

⁶⁷ Douglas Paul De Natale, "Bynum: The Coming of Mill Village Life to a North Carolina County." (January 1, 1985). Paper AAI8603629. p. 205.

help wouldn't have worked for him no more, I don't reckon. They were planning to come out, I think and strike. Planning to walk out, I think.”⁶⁸

Frank Durham's memory of worker discontentment concerning the marital infidelities of a fellow millworker and authority figure demonstrates how some Bynum residents' conflated the normally disparate spheres of work and community. To residents in Bynum, the mill did not signify a separate space from the general community. The mill and the community were one in the same, sharing power dynamics, social relationships, customs, norms, and traditions. This sense of community which workers found in both the home and the mill was borne not only of the company's ownership of both, but also in the fact that the management in Bynum exhibited less authoritarian tendencies than those in other mills such as Cannon Mills, a fact which itself is at least partially due to the close ties and interdependency that Bynum workers brought to the company town from their former agrarian context. Residents consistently employed the same analogy, likening Bynum to one big family.⁶⁹ Eula Vernon submitted,

Everybody was raised here, you know, and lived here all their life, and knowed everybody, and was just like a big family. When one of them would get in a hole or something, all the rest of them if they weren't in a hole they'd bunch in together and help them get out, catch up.⁷⁰

This conception of the Bynum community as being greater than the sum of its parts rather than merely a location for work and housing figured prominently into how Lewis Durham, Bynum's native, homegrown agitator, rationalized the failure of a labor union in Bynum. Lewis asserted, “I thought Bynum Mills was too small for an effective union, and I thought people were too

⁶⁸ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 48.

⁶⁹ Oral History Interview with Flossie Moore Durham, September 2, 1976. Interview H-0066. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 15

⁷⁰ Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 6.

deep-rooted there to back it, you know.”⁷¹ Bynum residents viewed the formation of a labor union as not only an affront to the mill company, which had saved them from the farm in the first place, but also as an act of betrayal towards respected bosses and company operators, who were neighbors, kin, and valued members of the Bynum community.

London v. Durham: Labor Conflict in Bynum

Far from the volatile labor dynamics of other, larger textile communities, Bynum residents associated tranquility with their small, quiet, and rural community, recalling how children used to play in the woods surrounding Bynum and workers would take breaks to go fishing. Conversely, larger company towns such as Gastonia, North Carolina retained no such rural charm or salubrious appeal. Proletarian novelist Mary Heaton Vorse described Gastonia’s Loray Mill in her 1930 labor novel *Strike!*, writing, “Around it was the mill village, running crazily up and down hill, every house like the other, bare wooden shacks standing in red mud on brick stilts. The little houses seemed like a flock of chicks beside a monstrous hen.”⁷²

Unlike the Loray Mill, Bynum was simply too distant, too small, and too rural to be of serious importance to labor agitators and union organizers. Historian Jim Leloudis, who conducted oral history interviews with Vernon and Eula Durham, asked explicitly about instances of labor agitation from sources external to the Bynum community, submitting, “There were groups called flying squadrons that went from mill to mill to try to shut them down. Did

⁷¹ Interview with Lewis Durham by Brent D. Glass, August 15, 1976, H-0068, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. p. 62.

⁷² Vorse, Mary Heaton. *Strike!* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991. p. 4.

any of them come to Bynum?”⁷³ Vernon and Eula Durham expressed similar sentiments: Eula simply stated, “Not that I know of,” while Vernon disclosed, “I don’t think so,” qualifying his remark by explaining that the small Bynum mill was likely of little consequence to state or national labor organizers. Vernon surmised, “This might not have been a large enough concern down here for them to visit.”⁷⁴ Vernon’s nephew Lewis Durham, who worked as a doffer in the mill, remembered hearing rumors that labor organizers were heading to Bynum during the 1934 General Strike.⁷⁵ Lewis recalls, “They had reports of [organizers] coming to Bynum, and they had the law there [waiting], but they never did get there. No, they never did get to Bynum. It was too little, I guess.”⁷⁶

Bynum residents’ memories of the General Strike of 1934 were distant and detached. When asked if he remembers the General Strike, Vernon Durham had little to say, submitting only, “I don’t remember anything about it.”⁷⁷ The rare instances of labor conflict in Bynum emerged from sources internal rather than external to the mill community and were resolved with relative ease due to Bynum’s size, which enabled workers to have direct access to company management. In cases of exigent discontentment, Bynum workers carried their grievances directly to persons of authority, settling disputes conclusively and peacefully.

⁷³ Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 26.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Doffing involves taking bobbins or spindles spun with fiber — cotton in this case — from a spinning frame and replacing them with empty ones.

⁷⁶ Interview with Lewis Durham by Brent D. Glass, August 15, 1976, H-0068, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

p. 34.

⁷⁷ Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 26.

While the Great Depression caused economic catastrophe for millworkers at larger factories, the Bynum mill remained in operation throughout the Depression, providing Bynum families with an envious supply of scarce, much-needed work and wages. Yet, despite enjoying a kind of economic stability which many of his textile worker counterparts did not possess in the middle of an unprecedented economic crisis, Lewis Durham felt compelled to ask for higher wages, believing that the company paid excessive wages for less-labor intensive positions while paying meager rates for the most demanding kinds of work. Lewis recalled, “We were asking for more money, the doffers were, and they wouldn't give it to us.” Lewis approached the mill’s general manager, John London, and extended an ultimatum, saying that he would walk away from the mill if he did not raise doffers’ wages. London declined and, consequently, Lewis Durham quit his mill job in 1935. “I'd just had enough of it,” Lewis said, recalling how he decided to open a local general mercantile and become his own boss.⁷⁸ London’s response to Lewis’ ultimatum reveals much about the accepted power dynamics in the Bynum mill and the limits to which both workers *and* managers could assert their respective wills.

Regarding his interaction with London in the general manager’s office, Lewis remembered, “He didn't say anything, just let us walk out. I've never been in that mill but once or a few times since then either.”⁷⁹ Lewis’ recollection of London’s refusal to raise wages, a decision which might have been influenced by the fact that worker wages in Bynum had recently doubled from ¢15 to ¢30 due to President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, stands in congruence with residents’ general memories of London. Carrie Lee Gerringer, Frank Durham, Flossie

⁷⁸ Ibid, 37-38.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Moore Durham, and others all remembered London for his firm, authoritative presence in the mill. Given these considerations, London's refusal to raise wages is no surprise.

What *is* noteworthy is Lewis' consequent occupation: proprietor of the town company store, Bynum's primary commercial establishment which was housed in a building owned by the very company Lewis had just left under circumstances of disagreement. Lewis summarized his experiences in 1935, saying,

It was in April when I walked out, and I went right after working on the place of business. And I opened up the store the first day of July in 1935. [...] I borrowed fifty dollars and bought a beer license, and went to selling beer. I had a big business then for a while [laughter].⁸⁰

Despite the confrontation with London, who could have exercised his authority as general manager to frustrate Lewis' business ambitions, the whole of Bynum happily patronized Lewis' store and life in Bynum continued as though no conflict had ever occurred.

Lewis Durham's confrontation with John London over wages stood out in residents' memories as the singular instance of serious labor conflict in Bynum's history. Eula Durham recalled, "I know one time, the spinning room went out there and wanted more money or something, and John told them he'd shut down before he'd give any more, and they went back to work."⁸¹ In Bynum, strikes were recalled as lasting only "an hour or two," and rarely culminated in any meaningful change in the status quo of worker-company dynamics.⁸²

As Lewis Durham's anecdote suggests, Bynum's small size served as an impediment to labor organizing forces outside of the community while also enabling a degree of leniency within the community on the part of the company and its interactions with wage laborers. When asked

⁸⁰ Interview with Lewis Durham by Brent D. Glass, August 15, 1976, H-0068, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. pp. 38-39.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 24.

⁸² *Ibid*, 26.

what he thought about the company management, Frank Durham offered a generous appraisal, stating, “This mill down here was very lenient. It really was good. That's what kept good help and good satisfied help.”⁸³ During Frank’s time at the mill, workers who had met their daily quotas were allowed to leave the mill and go fishing or step outside in the fresh air and smoke. The mill company encouraged leisure even when workers were off the clock, organizing and promoting a community baseball team (Appendix B, Image 2.1).

Frank made a point in his oral history interview to clarify that workers’ experiences in Bynum were not typical of the textile industry and that the Bynum mill extended certain special privileges to workers, creating a more congenial labor experience than that which was found at other textile mills. Frank recalls,

[T]he mill here had some qualities the other ones didn't have, and they lacked some. They didn't pay as much as they did in mills in town, but it cost you a little more to live there with rents and things. They didn't ever pay as much. They could get by here not paying much. One thing was the privilege, the privilege of being out when they were going out to smoke and stuff like that. A lot of mills wouldn't let you out at all, you know. And here they was allowed to go out and smoke, and if they'd catch up their work, go out and talk around once and then come back. Well, that was worth a whole lot. It sure was. You could work for less money, and you took that into consideration when you was hunting a job or fixing to change jobs.⁸⁴

An employee of the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA), Joe Glazer affirmed Frank Durham’s assessment.⁸⁵ In his interview with Frances Tamburro, conducted as part of the same oral history project which collected oral histories from Bynum residents, Glazer reflected on textile wages in North Carolina, saying,

⁸³ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. pp. 18-25.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 57-58

⁸⁵ Formed in 1939, the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) developed from and replaced the United Textile Workers of America (UTW).

If you take a look at an auto worker in the South or a steel worker in the South, first of all he makes twice what the textile worker in South makes. The textile worker in North Carolina would make about \$2.50 an hour, maybe \$3.00, \$2.75.⁸⁶

In Bynum, workers' hourly wage sat at a humble \$2.37.⁸⁷ As a mill in the American South, a region which is historically notorious for low rates of labor remuneration, Bynum offered lower than average wages, making its workers some of the lowest paid in the national textile industry. By way of contrast, Glazer noted, a janitor in a steel mill enjoyed an hourly wage of \$4.00.⁸⁸

In terms of quantifiable variables, the Bynum mill was miserly. Wages were below the regional industry average, healthcare was not a company concern, and pension plans were omitted entirely for no definitive reason.⁸⁹ However Bynum's record concerning non-quantifiable variables, such as company-worker relations and community engagement, made the community exceptional in the eyes of its residents, whose yeomen identities predisposed them with an apathy towards money.

Money in Bynum

For Frank Durham, as well as others, the relaxed atmosphere in Bynum was levied against the lower-than-average wages. In general, residents' oral histories reveal an apparent apathy towards money and the notion of wages itself, placing a higher emphasis on intangible

⁸⁶ Interview with Joe Glazer by Frances Tamburro, August 1, 1974 E-0005, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/10697/rec/14>. p. 13.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 14.

⁸⁹ Oral History Interview with Carrie Lee Geringer, August 11, 1979. Interview H-0077.

Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. pp. 35-36

metrics such as personal freedom and perceived sense of community. John Wesley Snipes emphasized the self-sufficiency of impecunious Bynum families, saying, “They made about everything they eat. They knit their own stockings, and the men did their own shoes and everything. Weren’t no money.”⁹⁰ Residents’ agrarian backgrounds helps to account for workers’ disregard for wages and currency, as money was of little utility in workers’ pre-mill lives as tenant farmers. As a musician, Frank Durham played with other mill employees in the Chatham Rabbits, an old-time string band, and frequently gave away the band’s earnings to charitable causes.⁹¹ Carrie Lee Gerringer recalled that her mother could “squeeze a dollar till it hollered like a ten-dollar bill.”⁹² The fact that wages were low in Bynum was of little consequence to workers, who had never had a meaningful attachment to or use for money in the first place, and who valued the ability to maintain a sense of community above cash compensation.

In the event that workers found themselves in need of cash, they often relied on their agrarian skills and pre-mill community. When Frank and Lewis’ father needed money to build the family home in Bynum, John London offered an interest free loan.⁹³ Eula Durham remembered a strong sense of community in Bynum, where families shared in success and worked to alleviate each other’s hardships. Concerning community, Eula summarized,

Bynum's always been good about that. If anybody here ever gets down or sick or disabled to work or anything, they've always been good to chip in and help them out in every way they could, give them money or give them food. Bynum has really been good about that.

⁹⁰ Oral History Interview with John W. Snipes, September 20, 1976. Interview H-0098-1. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. p. 13.

⁹¹ Ibid, 31-32.

⁹² Oral History Interview with Carrie Lee Gerringer, August 11, 1979. Interview H-0077. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. p. 14.

⁹³ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 11.

I've been here about all my life and I don't know of nobody here that ever would have sickness or anything like that but what somebody would chip in and help them out.⁹⁴

Lewis Durham remembered how his family supplemented mill earnings during hard times with a small livestock operation, reflecting, “We tended the cows, moved them around to better grass plots, you know; pulled up weeds for the hogs (we all raised hogs, you know, in those days, raising meat).”⁹⁵

The overlapping of the agrarian and industrial spheres constituted a prominent theme in residents’ oral histories. Bynum residents maintained a smaller, though nonetheless significant, agrarian economy which served the immediate physical and emotional needs of the community more directly than the more formalized economy of the mill. Narrators’ discussions of this parallel economy stands as evidence that millworkers saw themselves not as oppressed, helpless grunt labor, but as dignified mill town yeomen. Frank Durham recalled how his brother Lewis, in addition to being an active member of the non-mill commercial community in Bynum, forged an income from his unofficial dealings, saying,

And if he'd see [a cow] that he thought he could make a little something out of, he'd buy it. And maybe he could [barter] on it after he kept it for six months or something, tend to it good. For a milk cow. And he was constantly buying a little something. He'd buy a piece of land or anything he thought he could make a little money on. That's what kept him going [unknown] besides his pay in the mill.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 30.

⁹⁵ Interview with Lewis Durham by Brent D. Glass, August 15, 1976, H-0068, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. p. 12.

⁹⁶ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. pp. 39-40.

Recalling how residents' de facto agrarian economy provided a level of sustenance beyond what mill wages alone might have yielded, Carrie Lee Geringer stated, "We had plenty to eat."⁹⁷ Flossie Moore Durham expressed a similar sentiment, proudly declaring, "we never went hungry."⁹⁸

In some respects, the dual economic and communal spheres which existed within the Bynum company town resembled an "economy of affection," a concept explored by political scientist Göran Hydén.⁹⁹ In its general form, the "economy of affection" provides economic leverage to non-industrial groups against the pressures and influences of external cultural institutions.¹⁰⁰ An "economy of affection" describes a system in which pre-industrial institutions and networks such as kinship, tradition, and communal obligation protect non-industrial groups, such as rural peasantry or, as is the case with Bynum, agrarian yeomen, from becoming dependent on or beholden to non-native, more modernized social classes.¹⁰¹ Workers' predispositions towards self-sufficiency and the parallel economy which Bynum workers maintained amongst themselves — raising livestock, preserving surplus foodstuffs, and trading with neighbors — represented a source of power for workers.¹⁰² The vestigial principles, traditions, and social relations of non-industrial life, as well as workers' retention of their

⁹⁷ Ibid, 35.

⁹⁸ Oral History Interview with Flossie Moore Durham, September 2, 1976. Interview H-0066. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 2.

⁹⁹ Jiggins, Janice. 1981. "Review Article: Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania". Review of *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*. *Third World Quarterly* 3 (1). [Taylor & Francis, Ltd., Third World Quarterly]: 88–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3991392>. p. 88.

¹⁰⁰ Hydén, Göran. *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

¹⁰¹ Waters, Tony. 1992. "A Cultural Analysis of the Economy of Affection and the Uncaptured Peasantry in Tanzania". *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30 (1). Cambridge University Press: 163–75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/161051>. p. 163.

¹⁰² The extent to which workers were conscious of this power is debatable and would make an interesting point of focus for a research paper.

yeomen identities, ultimately enabled a form of economic independence which shielded millworkers from the possibility of intolerable company tyranny.

Memory and the Dissolution of the Bynum Company Town: An Epilogue

Nestled in the heart of the North Carolina Piedmont, Bynum, North Carolina is an anachronism in the era of twenty-first century suburban development. A quaint hillside village above a gentle river, Bynum sits just a mile from the hectic four-lane State Highway 64, a gentle, hidden locale and a sparsely populated, unincorporated community to this day. Rows of picturesque cottages line Bynum's quiet, one-lane roads, resting beneath weathered oaks, hickories, and ash. Within the trees and beyond the homes stands the skeleton of Bynum's defining establishment: the textile mill. An undated photograph reveals the mill in its former industrial glory, overlooking the Haw River, which becomes a tributary of the Cape Fear, North Carolina's largest river, just a few miles south of Bynum (Appendix A, Image 1.1). The Haw's reliable water flow, which powered the Bynum mill for decades, continues to roll over the now defunct mill dam and under the historic Bynum bridge. Strolling through Bynum's gentle thoroughfares on a warm day, one might never suspect that the community once housed an active textile mill, that the houses now so quaint and picturesque belonged to millworkers and their families, that Bynum itself represents industry, capitalism, and, perhaps most surprisingly, a contentious legacy of corporate paternalism.

Many of the cottages that once housed the Moores, Snipses, Gerringers, and Durhams now serve as homes for those looking to settle down in life, namely retired couples and newlyweds, who shuttle in and out of Bynum on Highway 64 during the week, bound for

Durham, Chapel Hill, or Raleigh. A small number of residents from the days of the company town remain as well, but the number of surviving millworkers, like the physical presence of the mill itself, is fading. Yet, visitors can still gaze upon the remnants of Bynum's previous existence in the old, abandoned mill ruins, which create an obscure portrait of a controversial era in the storied labor history of the American South: industrialization.

A 2004 article from the Raleigh newspaper *The News and Observer* offers an appraisal of Bynum's legacy as a mill town and industrial relic, stating,

Southern textile mills of the last century evoke a range of emotions, a few of them strong and surprising. Resentment of wealthy mill owners' paternalism toward their poorly paid workers still smolders in North Carolina, even as nostalgia blooms for the sense of community fostered by the mills. [...] It's a way of life that is quickly disappearing from North Carolina as mills close. Many would say it's disappearing none too soon -- but this was the way many people in this state and throughout the South lived their lives.¹⁰³

Indeed, many residents harbored both nostalgia and resentment for the Bynum company town and the community which it represented. Sentimental notions of life in the old company town, while certainly present in residents' memories of Bynum, coexisted alongside feelings of disillusionment and alienation, borne of the mill's change in management, racial integration, and ultimate collapse.

In "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker," historian John Bodnar examined Studebaker Corporation as a defining institution in the lives and memories of autoworkers in South Bend, Indiana.¹⁰⁴ Bodnar noted how workers' oral histories reflected a palpable sense of unsettledness and weightlessness in the years following the

¹⁰³ "Old mills, new future." *News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC)*, August 10, 2004. *NewsBank - Archives*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 16, 2016).

¹⁰⁴ Bodnar, John. "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker." *Journal Of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989): 1201-1221. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 1, 2016).

Studebaker plant's termination. In losing the customs, rituals, images, and community that accompanied Studebaker's hegemonic presence in South Bend, workers lost a compass for their own identities as individuals. The same could be said for Bynum's yeomen millworkers, who likewise found themselves lost amidst the changes which accompanied the post-World War II textile economy, when Bynum began to shed much of the agrarian culture which had hitherto characterized the community and its residents. Indeed, Bynum residents' yeomen identities defined not only their memories of the first decades of the twentieth century, when the mill was operating at its height and they were part of the workforce, but also memories of the mill's change in management during the early 1970s, followed by narrators' retirements from millwork, and the final decline of the Bynum mill, which followed that of the general state textile industry.

The overlap which workers had long enjoyed between their native agricultural context and their adopted industrial context — working with cotton, the continued presence of a non-monetary communal economy, the retention of gardening, canning, and limited worker self-sufficiency, and labor in familiarly harsh conditions — engendered a deep, abiding bond between residents and the institution of the Bynum mill. For more than half a century, Bynum's two hegemonic institutions, workers' yeomen culture and the textile mill, worked in concert rather than conflict. Consequently, residents repeatedly demonstrated deference and loyalty to John London and the J.M. Odell Manufacturing Company, which ran the mill during the years in which many farm families arrived in Bynum.

Conversely, residents' delivered critical appraisals of the new company, which assumed responsibility of the mill in the early 1970's. The new management represented a departure from

the agrarian traditions and community they had loved and cherished.¹⁰⁵ Vernon Durham, who worked his way from cleaning equipment and machinery to mill superintendent, best expressed the general dissatisfaction concerning the Odell Company's successor, providing the following assessment of Bynum under the new management: "It just ain't no ways like it used to be. No ways."¹⁰⁶ Memories of the new management's efforts to perform a comprehensive overhaul of textile production embodied residents' feelings of alienation from their once beloved community. Frank Durham recalled,

It was a new company, and they went to blends instead of all cotton. They have a certain blend, ninety percent cotton and ten percent rayon, and thirty-five percent this and all sorts of percentages. I was used to a cotton job all the time, and I liked it so much better I never did get used to it.¹⁰⁷

Frank's uncle Vernon Durham echoed his nephew's memories, saying, "When you worked then it didn't run bad. That cotton was altogether different from this here old polyester and nylon and mess."¹⁰⁸ Bynum residents' ties to agrarian notions of work and community, once critical in promoting a smooth transition from the field to the factory, ultimately turned vestigial in the face of economic growth and technological development.

The integration of black workers into the mill augmented residents' feelings of alienation. In his oral history, Vernon Durham combined the two separate events of racial integration and the establishment of new management to form one discrete era in the mill's history.¹⁰⁹ Under the

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, the Odell family remained financially invested in the Bynum mill after turning over operation of the mill to the new company. The Odell family also turned over company records to Bynum's new managers, who later destroyed them, leaving Bynum's history limited largely to the oral record.

¹⁰⁶ Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 12.

¹⁰⁷ Oral History Interview with Frank Durham, September 10 and 17, 1979. Interview H-0067. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 67.

¹⁰⁸ Oral History Interview with Eula and Vernon Durham, November 29, 1978. Interview H-0064. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 16-17.

new management, a group once considered subordinate to Bynum's workers became their equals. When asked if the black employees were members of the Bynum community, Vernon responded, "No, they all come from out on Siler City Road, and around Pittsboro, and back up here in the country toward Chapel Hill."¹¹⁰ As the new management began to reorganize the mill, Bynum's majority white residents experienced the double insult of being replaced by outsiders from a lower class.

As the mill became increasingly mechanized, its textile blends more synthetic, and its workforce composed of outsiders, lifelong Bynum residents found themselves lost in a familiar space. As visible signs of Bynum's old existence began to fade, residents' memories turned to that which had been lost: lenient management, agreeable working conditions, and, most importantly, cherished community. Recalling an old Bynum adage, John Wesley Snipes captured the essence of Bynum's disappearing yeomen community, once the heart and soul of the company town. Snipes reflected, "Bynum's red mud. If you stick to Bynum, it'll stick to you when it rains."¹¹¹ Indeed, the oral histories of Bynum's yeomen millworkers, who abandoned life in Chatham County's tobacco turnrows and cotton fields for the economic promise of the Bynum company town, with its low wages and undisguised corporate paternalism, reveal that John Wesley Snipes spoke for all who had known Bynum as it was and would never be again.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 18.

¹¹¹ Oral History Interview with John W. Snipes by Douglas De Natale, August 22, 1979. Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Untranscribed, tape index p. 3.

Appendix A
Photographic Comparison



Image 1.1

This undated photograph depicts a bustling Bynum mill beside the Haw River. Contrasted with image 1.2, a panorama of Cannon Mills, Bynum is a small, antiquated industrial enclave in an otherwise rural locale.¹¹²

¹¹² "Bynum Mill and Covered Bridge." Digital image. [Http://www.chathamhistory.org/](http://www.chathamhistory.org/). Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.chathamhistory.org/photogallery.html>.

Appendix A Continued



Image 1.2

This panorama of Cannon Mills dated between 1915-1935 resembles a small city, conveying a sense of the mill's grand size.¹¹³

¹¹³ "Cannon Mills Panorama." Digital image. Accessed March 15, 2016.
<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~jganis/CabarrusCo/CannonMillPanorama.jpg>.

Appendix B
Portrait of the Bynum Baseball Team

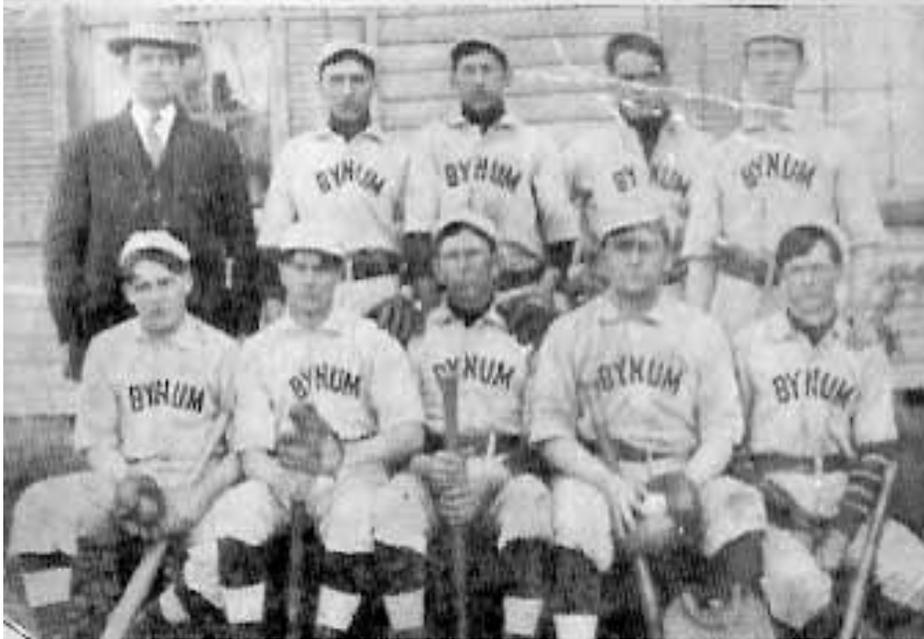


Image 2.1

The Bynum company town baseball team circa 1910. Mill superintendent Edgar Moore is the man in the suit.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ "Bynum Baseball Team." Digital image. [Http://www.chathamhistory.org](http://www.chathamhistory.org). Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.chathamhistory.org/photogallery.html>.

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