

The Life Cycle of a Typical Piedmont Carolinas Cotton Mill Town

William Douglas Cooper

Professor

Business Information Systems and Operations Management

Belk College of Business

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Charlotte, NC, USA

wdcooper@uncc.edu

ABSTRACT

In this article the author traces the twentieth century evolution of cotton textile mill towns in the Piedmont Carolinas. A typical twentieth century mill town in this area was Dr. Cooper's home town of Marion, North Carolina, and is the focus of the article. Unlike most mill town articles that focus on the mill village family, Dr. Cooper uses his experiences as a "town kid," textile college professor, and operations vice president of three different textile firms to present a broad, integrated view of the textile mill towns of the Piedmont Carolinas and the political, social and economic forces that defined them during the twentieth century. In the article the author challenges the conventional wisdom, expressed by Sinclair Lewis and others, that the Carolinas' cotton textile mills "exploited" their employees.

Keywords: textile mills, cotton, historical textile plants, textile villages

Introduction

In 1844 at a crossroads in a central part of McDowell County, the town of Marion, North Carolina was established as the County Seat. Through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and more than the next half century, the town served the area farmers as the seat of government and as a place to buy and sell with an eye toward the replenishment of their needed supplies. The first industrial plants of the Marion area began to arrive in the first twenty years of the twentieth century with the Marion Manufacturing Company (1909), Clinchfield Mills (1914) and Cross Mill (1916) textile operations. These textile mills were joined in 1918 by a furniture operation, Drexel Furniture Company. With the arrival of

these industrial plants, Marion became one of North Carolina's many "mill towns."

Marion Manufacturing Company began operations in Marion, North Carolina as a cotton textile mill in 1910. During the summer of 2011 the buildings of the old mill were taken down. The structures were not imploded to generate an instantaneous pile of broken bricks but rather were removed brick by brick. The demolition gave the effect of offering a deserved respect for the history of the old structures that was earned over a hundred years of being. The buildings housed cotton textile production that received national attention during the late 1920s and early 1930 and is still referred to in a variety of history publications. Sinclair Lewis¹ had some very

negative things to say about labor issues at Marion Manufacturing Company in 1929, and in 2004 Lawing² reprised some of the events of 1929 in his book, *The Marion Massacre*. These publications, and others like them, have over the years painted a picture of oppressive working conditions, child labor, lack of personal freedom and labor exploitation, all supported by a passive political structure. In general, the author finds that his university students of the current sound-bite generation have accepted a stereotypical negative impression about the Piedmont Carolinas and their textile industry history that precludes a balanced understanding of the issues of the time. They also lack, he suggests, an understanding of the dramatic changes that occurred in that industry in the post World War II era that are celebrated in Cooper's work *The US Textile Industry Renaissance of 1960-80*.³

In his book, *Linthead*, Browning⁴ writes of growing up in a Carolina mill village in Easley, South Carolina with a fond nostalgia that might cause the reader to question the veracity and conventional wisdom about living conditions and worker-family exploitation expressed by Sinclair Lewis and others. As a person who grew up in the mill town of Marion, North Carolina, went to high school with mill kids, played varsity sports with them, visited their houses and counted them as friends, like Browning, I experienced similar feelings of fond nostalgia as I watched the old Marion Manufacturing buildings come down. However, while Browning and I are of the same generation, his nostalgia and mine come from two distinctly different points of view. Browning was a mill village kid and I was a town kid. My family was neither wealthy nor influential. My father owned a small grocery store and as a town kid my view of the mill village was as an outsider looking in. However, I could and did date the mill president's daughter and serve as an escort at her debutant ball appearance. On one occasion at the major state debutant ball in Raleigh; our party was welcomed at the

governor's mansion by the governor of North Carolina. Because as late as the 1950s and 1960s mill towns were a class-based society, it is highly unlikely a mill kid could have had similar experiences. In the pre World War II period, Marion, like the state's other mill towns contained three, segregated, populations. Marion contained a middle class of doctors, lawyers and merchants who lived in the town and were dependent on the continued profitability of the mills, but wished to socially and geographically be separated from both the mills and their mill villages. The populations of Marion's mill villages were, generally, restricted to white mill worker families. In addition, Marion, like other mill towns, had a "colored" section where blacks, except for providing services to the middle class of the town as domestics, janitors, etc. lived in separate isolation from the white communities. The "correctness" of this separation had general acceptance across the class consciousness of the typical mill town in the Piedmont Carolinas and was the case in Marion. While some social barriers of the mill town were beginning to be broken or were at least becoming more flexible during the time of Browning and myself, we were still, in the main, living in a class-based society.

In his book⁴ Browning speaks to the differences in mill village life between his time when there was money to spend on a television and the time of his grandparents who received company scrip that could only be spent at the company store. He saw mill life as never being as bad as it was portrayed by northern writers, and as evolving for the better between the time of his grandparents and his generation. As a youth observing the Marion mill village quality of life, I had this same opinion. In later years my view of textile mill village life was colored by years of working in textile education, textile management, and textile industry consulting during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s with the North Carolina State College of Textiles, Burlington Industries and numerous other textile companies. During this period Burlington and others were attempting to

turn the textile industry into a technology-based, skilled-labor industry, where workers drove their cars to a work place that provided a healthy, worker-friendly environment. Not having been there in the days of Browning's grandparents, I have a hard time relating to the stereotypical, Sinclair Lewis, employee exploitation, views of the cotton textile industry of the Carolinas. However, like Browning and his grandparents, Sinclair Lewis and I were of different generations with different views and different agendas and our opinions should be viewed in concert with the times.

Without depending on the starting point, one can say that North Carolina and its textile industry supply chains evolved together for well over one hundred years. A part of this evolution saw the rise and fall of the state's mill towns and constituent mill villages. The people in these towns and villages were inextricably linked to the vagaries of the national U.S. textile and apparel industries. The history of these towns and villages was based in economic changes that evolved slowly and then rapidly over time. The rapid pace of post-World War II changes destabilized a significant part of North Carolina's economic, social and political infrastructure and introduced the state to the coming global economy of the twenty-first century. To contribute to a better understanding of this evolution and thus a better understanding of North Carolina's history is the intent of this paper.

Laying the Labor Infrastructure in North Carolina

To understand the development of a labor infrastructure to support post Civil War cotton textile production in the Piedmont Carolinas one needs to have some understanding of the southern ante-bellum economic and political structure that provided the legacy for industrial formation in the Piedmont Carolinas at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1860 North Carolina's capital stock was contained in land, slaves,

livestock and infrastructure. Land was considered "real" property. Slaves, livestock and personal items were considered "personal" property. Infrastructure contained the facilities, legal and social structure that allowed the economic system to work. In Churchill's⁵ History of the English Speaking Peoples he makes the point that "before the American Civil War of the six million white inhabitants of the 'slave states' about three or four thousand principal slave owners generally ruled the politics of the South as effectively as the medieval baronage had ruled England." The wealth derived from the capital stock was allocated in a disproportional way to slave owning planters, as the owning of slaves generated synergistic profits for slave owners across all available resources. However, North Carolina contained a good number of yeoman farmers who could provide for their own family needs with either no or few slaves. These yeoman farmers using, mostly, family labor had the good fortune of being somewhat self-sufficient in meeting their family needs from the ownership of relatively small holdings of productive land along rivers, streams or creeks that provided for productive soil. In addition to the planter and yeoman class, North Carolina contained a good number of what historians call "poor whites" that were lacking in productive land, slaves or livestock and the slave-based economic infrastructure gave this group little opportunity to break out of a cycle of poverty. Money was scarce and working for wages was a relatively rare event. In 1857 Helper⁶ had spoken to the issue of North Carolina's poor whites. His book pointed out that a labor market of slave labor gave little-to-no opportunity for poor white labor to compete for employment. Non-farm jobs in the Piedmont Carolinas, both skilled and non-skilled, were dominated by slave-owners who would "rent" their slaves for specific projects, restricting the availability of non-farm labor outlets for poor whites. Thus, lacking an alternative labor market, those without access to productive land, and/or lacking resources to work any land they might own, were relegated to a status of

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poverty. Helper's⁶ book was considered incendiary and banned in North Carolina. It should be noted that a good portion of these "poor whites" were Scots-Irish who had been "pushed" by the infrastructure to non-productive lands in the Piedmont and mountain sections of the Carolinas and in their isolation had developed independent survival strategies.

The outcome of the Civil War decimated the capital stocks of North Carolina as the stock price of slaves was reduced to zero. Livestock and infrastructure capital had been consumed by the War. The State and individuals faced oppressive debt. In addition, new infrastructure laws governing commerce, arriving during Reconstruction, generated economic uncertainty to the point that in 1870, it is fair to say that North Carolina was in a state of near economic chaos. Much has been written to lay blame for the state of devastation the Carolinas and the South found itself. Too much power in the hands of too few people is a way Churchill⁵ and others might explain the condition. However, in 1880 for many in the Piedmont and mountains of the Carolinas, thoughts were more about survival than laying blame. The economic concept "sunk costs are sunk" comes to mind. It was time to move on. For those without access to resources, one can argue that the outcome of the Civil War created the need for the cotton textile industry in the Piedmont Carolinas as a survival alternative. As historians argue the pros and cons of the cotton textile industry in the Carolinas, one must accept the fact that its existence provided a rational solution to a good number of problems for many of the post-Reconstruction and later generations of the Carolinas and the South.

Much of the character of North Carolina's twentieth century labor supply structure was defined during the very short, but critical, time that spanned the post Civil War 1870-1900 period. Lefler and Newsome⁷ in their chapter on The Industrial Revolution in North Carolina discuss this period in some detail. With the end of

Reconstruction in the South in 1877, opposing forces within the Democratic Party of North Carolina fought for control of the Party and with that control, the ability to define the future economic and social direction for the state. By 1900 one side in the struggle had emerged victorious and had set the state on its twentieth century course.

During the 1870 – 1900 period, the yeoman farmers of North Carolina became convinced that the Democratic Party was unresponsive to their economic problems. North Carolina farmers were experiencing chronic economic depression from national agricultural overproduction which generated falling prices for farm products and rising prices for the means of production. It was a time of "free market" capitalism with pervasive, unregulated monopoly power for capital owners. North Carolina's farmers were ill equipped to participate in this game. North Carolina's Yeomen were forced to bear a significant and disproportionate share of the state tax burden via state real property taxes. Most businesses could escape personal property taxes on items such as stocks and bonds, and manipulate assessments on their own real property. In addition, the railroads enjoyed almost complete exemption from taxation. However, sales of farms for unpaid taxes by bankrupt North Carolina Yeomen were a common occurrence and forced the farmers to accept whatever nonfarm work was available as a means of family survival. Those farmers that could escape bankruptcy found themselves in a state of perpetual debt due to exorbitant credit costs. As high credit costs kept the Yeomen in debt to the merchants, in order to pay the credit bill, the farmer opted for producing a money crop rather than pursuing a diversified live-at-home subsistence economy, as did the majority of the state's prewar Yeomen. These conditions fostered a general hatred among the Yeomen for the policies and institutions that perpetuated their plight. How could it be that the pre Civil War yeoman farming backbone of the state was being forced into a choice of extinction or a

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humiliating dependence on oppressive debt financing? Thus, North Carolina's yeoman farmers began to find common issues with blacks and whites outside the traditional Democratic Party political structure. This coalition of former Democrats, with Republicans and recently freed blacks, led to the "farmers' legislature of 1891." This fusion of support for common issues created a liberal force in North Carolina that was a threat to the ruling Democrats and a competing vision for their future socio-political-economic structure of the state. In opposition to the yeoman wing of the Democratic Party was a group of young Democrats who called themselves "progressives." This new wing of the Party saw the fusion of yeomen, freed blacks and Republican Party issues as a threat to their plans for the "industrialization" of the state.

A post-Civil War strategy of the "progressive" wing the North Carolina Democratic Party was to make use of the poor whites and postwar debt-ridden yeoman farmers as a labor force to attract cotton textile industry production into the Piedmont region of the Carolinas. It was believed that the eventual success of that strategy would make it possible for North Carolina to maintain an economic policy of "cheap" labor practices that would support the labor supply of the state's mills and landlords for well into the future of the State. Cecelski and Tyson⁸, Gilmore⁹, and Ayers¹⁰ cover the success of the Democrats' 1898-1902 white supremacy political campaign that broke the fusion movement. They report on the methods used to break the political strength of North Carolina's yeomen farmers and attain the disenfranchised of the state's black voters for the future. With the success of the white supremacy campaign, North Carolina's blacks were, in effect, locked into the economic slavery of sharecropping and a significant number of yeomen farmers lost their hope for a self-sufficient way of life in an increasingly mill dominated state. On the other hand, the state's poor whites were provided an economic alternative in an

industrial environment. A system of mill villages was established that, while lacking in some relative quality-of-life features, was an improvement over the next-best alternative for those laborers that found their way into the mill villages. This mill village system was maintained in the Piedmont Carolinas for over one-half of the twentieth century. Mill towns and mill villages grew up around each other, creating mill towns that, with their unique characteristics, became an important part of the Piedmont Carolinas and the twentieth century culture of the south.

The First Mill Villages

Part of the political strategy of the North Carolina Democratic Party in their white supremacy campaigns of 1898 and 1902 was to advance their vision of the industrialization of North Carolina as a path to a positive economic future for the poor white people of North Carolina. In their campaigns they advanced the concept of using the growth of the cotton textile industry as an element in a general program of social betterment that included the rehabilitation and protection of the state's poor white people from the competition of restricted black labor. Lefler and Newsome⁷ point out that the mill village was advocated as a social and economic structure that would serve the needs of white society as well as the needs of both industry and labor. The mill community was presented as a process of disciplined and gainful industrial employment that would allow millworkers full equality within the white race. However, in fact, the emerging reality of cotton textile industrialization was not so much driven by a desire for social betterment but by a desire to stabilize a factory labor force in the production of cotton textile products and to preserve planter control of the black labor force in agriculture. Here, both planters and mill owners sought to maximize profits as a return on their capital.

Wood¹¹ discusses the mill village as a concept based on mill employers adopting a

family labor system and policies of mill village paternalism. The mill village evolved as an institution for socializing, stabilizing and controlling the mill's labor force. It accomplished this by becoming the center of the social, political, religious, educational and economic activities of the mill family. Mill paternalism was accomplished by having control over where people lived, what they bought, what they learned and how they worshiped their God. As the mills owned the houses, the company store, the schools and the churches they were able to institute a comprehensive welfare system that was designed to stabilize the labor force and produce a class of hereditary workers. At the turn of the twentieth century the mill village had the support of government in North Carolina. Government labor restrictions in support of mill employees were opposed by law makers on the basis of acceptance of the principle of "individual freedom of determination." Families had the option to accept mill employment, or not, with any mill village requirements associated with that employment. Thus, at the turn of the twentieth century thousands of destitute farmers willingly accepted mill life as it was defined. Granted, these people had few alternatives for quality of life improvements other than mill work. But, mill work was considered a preferred alternative that most employees considered a quality of life improvement. In general, the labor force included a mixture of what historians call "poor whites," and "mountaineers," who had little-to-no productive land of their own, and indebted yeoman farmers. Thus, mill owners were able to exercise freely their own discretion in determining mill village policy within a local market environment for the recruitment of families to work in the mills. One tool used in the recruitment of mill workers was the existence of mill schools and churches supported with mill funds. Many mill schools were wholly financed by the mill or, in some cases, mill funds would be used to supplement local tax appropriations. In general, mill schools and churches were used as tools for teaching and

supporting acceptable mill behavior. For most employees whose children had come from circumstances of little education, the possibility of obtaining some education for some employee children was considered a recruiting incentive. Mill owners and management agreed that some level of schooling was important to maintain a productive work force. However, within the general education-poor environment of North Carolina, during the early twentieth century, it was not an uncommon belief that too much education spoiled the worker. Thus, in general, school was not a top priority. Schools were places for children to go while their parents were working or when the children were not needed in the mill. Mill churches were a place to encourage "right-thinking" Christian, work and family, responsibility values.

Southern Cotton Textile Supply Chain Network Cost and Pricing Structure

The major production and distribution nodes of the cotton textile supply chain network can be generalized to include fiber production, yarn forming, fabric forming, fabric treating and finishing, product forming and product distribution. During the first half of the twentieth century the nodes of production and distribution in southern cotton textile mills were organized around a group of agent brokers and their associated customers. Each of these agent groups maintained a portfolio of mills that specialized in one or more of the production process nodes of the network chain. Each agent group coordinated the products of its clients with other agent groups to provide the various components needed to assemble and distribute a final product. These agent groups defined material movement, negotiated material transfer prices and facilitated product flow through the manufacturing-distribution supply chain network.

Among manufacturing industries of the first half of the twentieth century, cotton textile production represented an economic model of near perfect completion. Weiss¹²

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shows that cotton textile production firms were price takers rather than price setters. Profits were determined by a firm's unit cost structure. Cotton textile mills used relatively little capital and great amounts of low skilled labor. Cotton textile technology for yarn and fabric production was not complex and affordable by relatively small capital holders. Total fixed costs for the typical mill were a small part of total cost at any but very low levels of output. It was, in the main, a variable cost industry. These variable costs included the prices of labor, materials, energy and transportation. While one may think of cotton textile production during this period as labor intensive, in fact, materials, energy and transportation intensive would be a better characterization. As late as the 1950s, the 1954 Census of Manufacturers¹² showed materials and energy to process the materials ranging between 60 and 70 percent of shipment dollars for yarn and fabric products. Thus, cotton textile mill profitability for the first half of the twentieth century depended upon cheap materials (cotton), cheap energy to process materials, cheap transportation to move materials and a cheap supply of labor. Any deviation in this cost structure by individual mills would put the existence of those mills in harm's way.

The industry cost structure was such that there was little to no advantage of large scale mills over smaller ones. Mills that employed only a few hundred people were large enough to use the most advanced technology at each stage of the production process. Thus, most of the mills in the cotton textile industry were small, and were individually owned by families or small local companies. These southern mill owners had a distinct advantage in labor costs over their northern counterparts. At the beginning of the twentieth century northern cotton textile mill labor rates were almost double those in the south. These low wage rates in the Carolinas and Georgia were primarily due to a lack of alternative employment opportunities for labor. In addition southern state legislatures treated

the new cotton textile mills with the tenderness of ownership as they imposed little to no social legislation to aid labor.

Although the capital requirements of cotton textile production were relatively small compared to the variable cost structure, these requirements were critical to effective competition in national markets. After 1880 the expansion of cotton textile mill output required external capital (see Cooper and Dyer¹³). For the products of Piedmont Carolina cotton textile mills to be able to compete on a national level they needed state-of-the art textile machinery, and investment capital was in short supply in the postwar south. Also, investment by northern owned capital frequently met with opposition in the postwar south. Thus, a typical strategy was for local entrepreneurs to raise as much capital as possible locally, to provide for basic infrastructural facilities, and then ask northern textile machinery manufacturers to provide machinery in return for stock in the newly formed company.

The demand for southern cotton mill products was derived from the demand for final textile products whose markets were centered in the north. In selling yarns and fabrics the mills were represented by small groups of agent brokers located in New York City. These agent groups were the main sources of market information and the main outlet of product sales for their mill product clients. Commission agents in New York and other commercial centers provided working capital in return for stock and/or being granted the mill's agency contract. In many cases mill operations were financed by agents that would either take mill stock or make short term loans against a firm's inventories and/or accounts receivable. Thus, the cotton textile mills in the south were providing cheap raw material inputs, under highly competitive conditions, for additional value added production in the north, where the sale of final textile and apparel products would take place.

Basic economic price theory¹⁴ tells one that the derived demand for any factor

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of production used in fixed proportions with other factors will be more price inelastic:

1. The more essential the factor in question,
2. The more price inelastic the demand curve for the final product,
3. The smaller the fraction of total cost that goes to the factor in question, and
4. The more price inelastic the supply curve of the other co-operating factors.

Consider how essential the yarn or fiber produced by a Piedmont Carolinas mill might be relative to the total final product supply chain. As agents could choose among a number of yarn and fabric producers to include within their portfolio, no one mill was essential to the final product supply chain. The demand for a factor was likely to be far more essential in the short run than in the long run. In the long run, substitutes for expensive factors became available and consumers found other ways to meet their product needs. Now consider the fraction of total product cost associated with the yarn and/or fabric factor in question. Because yarn and fabric costs are a significant proportion of final product costs, any small increase in factor price would be an incentive for a given agent to choose an alternative mill. These conditions contributed to the lack of potential effectiveness of union organizations in a cotton textile mill environment during the first half of the twentieth century. In a business of marginal returns to capital, small increases in allocations of returns to labor would only drive capital to alternative uses. In general, the two factors, essentialness and fraction of final product cost were significant components of the failure of cotton textile mill union organization during the first half of the twentieth century. Additional reasons for this failure can be taken from the perceptions of mill workers that they were not being “exploited” and, given their economic alternatives, were satisfied to continue employment under current conditions. Wood¹¹ speaks to the point that while low wage levels were not successfully addressed by textile unions

during the late 1920s and throughout the New Deal period of the 1930s, the desire from some corners in the north for social change in the south kept the threat of unionism alive for mill ownership in the south. In general, New Deal labor relations legislation did not pose a direct threat for production relations in the Carolinas or elsewhere in the South. This was because industry in the south was protected by anti-union “right-to-work laws” that were passed by the state legislatures and could only be overturned in the political arena. It was well understood that the south had enough political power at the national and state levels that overturning these “right-to-work” laws was problematical.

Cotton Textile Mills and Electric Power in the Piedmont Carolinas

Though lacking in coal, iron, and capital for the development of heavy, mechanized industry, the Piedmont Carolinas in 1880 had an abundant amount of water to be used for power generation, an abundant labor supply and proximity to the cotton raw materials required for the development of cotton textile product production. Prior to 1880 a major portion of Carolina’s cotton mills used water wheel power as a source of energy. This technology required location of the production facilities literally on the banks of the streams and rivers that drove the water wheels. With advancements in steam technology, the use of steam power became more economical than water wheel power for cotton textile production, and was not as confining in terms of mill location. Lefler and Newsome⁷ point out that after 1880 the cotton mills of North Carolina moved rapidly to the use of steam power. In 1880, about 16 percent of cotton textile mills used steam power as their energy source and by 1900 that percentage had grown to about 64 percent. Steam power for the mill did, however, require a steam generating plant so the mills still needed a source of water and coal for fuel.

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Thus location near water as well as proximity to transport facilities for coal and the cotton raw materials were important logistical factors. Another source of power for the mills was introduced in 1898 when the Fries Manufacturing and Power Company installed a hydro-electric plant on the Yadkin River. This was the first hydroelectric plant in North Carolina and as early as 1900 a small but potentially important two and one-half percent of the textile mill power was electric.

In 1905 the Southern Power Company (now Duke Energy) was chartered. Durden¹⁵ covers the 1904 to 1997 history of the Duke Power Company and speaks to the interaction between the J.B. Duke family and the growing cotton textile industry in North Carolina. The Southern Power Company was the product of the Duke family who were about to use their great wealth, gained in large part from tobacco, to support a new technology that would have a profound effect on North and South Carolina cotton textile production. The new technology would enable the industrialization of the Piedmont region of the Carolinas and give rise to the demand for cotton mills, and associated mill towns. This demand swept over the region from its beginning to well within the twentieth century. The new electric technology was based in the idea of long distance transmission of electric power at high voltage. This technology offered the promise of inexpensive variable cost power for the mills and rapid industrialization of the Piedmont Carolinas. But, to bring this idea of high voltage transmission over long distances to fulfillment, large amounts of capital were required to build electric utilities. The great majority of private investor attempts to provide electric power ended with the investors in hock to the manufacturers of expensive generators and turbines or to investment banks. However, the Duke family not only had the wealth required, but, also, had access to the knowledge base and the water assets of Piedmont Carolina's Catawba River and its

valley. All this put them in a unique position to develop and promulgate the new technology. This new technology dramatically created new opportunities for cotton textile mill profitability and growth in the Piedmont Carolinas.

For existing mills the adoption of the new electrical system technology was based on expectations of significant variable cost energy savings. To prove the worth of the new technology, the Duke family invested significant capital in their own cotton textile mills to show that electrical powered engines gave steadier, smoother and more satisfactory machine speeds at lower unit costs than did the existing steam technology. Because converting from steam energy to electric energy required considerable investment in the new technology, new mills that started after about 1915-1920 had the advantage of a being able to build their new facilities around the new technology rather than adapt their existing steam driven operations to the technology of full electric power plants. A significant outcome from the new technology for hydroelectric power relative to the development of cotton textile mills in the Piedmont Carolinas was in the area of logistics. Given the poor state of transportation facilities in the Carolinas before the 1920s, a central factor in the development of cotton mill towns was the ability to centralize production around a railroad transportation hub. Here, the capability to provide for long distance transmission of electric power at high voltage allowed multiple mills to concentrate around railway transport hubs without depending on location-specific power sources. Thus mills and their mill villages could be located close to economical material and product transport modes, while, at the same time, inexpensive energy could be exported from central power stations located at a distance. In effect the new energy technology was the perfect complement to cheap labor, facilities, and transportation. The new technology had a profound synergistic effect of improving the

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efficiency, and thus, the cost structure, across all cotton textile process variables, and in so doing generated the need for cotton textile mill towns. Durden¹⁵ reports that Charles Cannon of Cannon Mills once expressed the opinion that the development of Cannon Mills and the mill town of Kannapolis, North Carolina, would never have happened in the absence of the technology developed by the Duke family and their Southern Power Company.

The Piedmont Carolinas Cotton Textile Industry during the 1920s and 1930s

The large-scale relocation of the U.S. cotton textile industry to the Carolinas Piedmont began in the mid-1920s. By the end of the 1930s this area had replaced New England as the center of American cotton textile production. During this period the Piedmont Carolinas continued to have a large supply of available, cheap labor, and only limited labor market competition for this labor. The area's cotton mill working class was politically and economically weak, largely unorganized, and isolated, with few powerful political allies. In addition, there existed a relative absence of legislation restricting the conditions under which labor could be employed. By the late 1920s, a symbiotic relationship had developed between the mills and their towns where banks, power companies, professional service providers and merchants were all caught up in the need for the local mills to survive and prosper. As a result, these town-based commercial institutions began to play sophisticated and organized political and economic roles in support of the welfare of the mill owners located near the town. Given the town-mill relationships, which included town-based investment support for the mills, one could not be surprised that for any labor dispute between mill workers and owners, the town-side support would fall on the side of mill management. Because the mill labor force had few friends and little recourse for its grievances, cotton textile mill labor in the Piedmont Carolinas was considered vulnerable, by some writers, to potential labor exploitation.

America's Great Depression began in the cotton textile industry at least a half decade earlier than for the American economy as a whole. The national cotton textile industry experienced severe business downturns in 1920, 1921 and 1924, and these downturns led to about fifteen years of very low or deficit returns to capital. These low or deficit returns were a product of a number of factors, including emerging post-World War I foreign competition, cotton raw material price variability, and the power imbalance between the commission agents that controlled sales and marketing of the finished textile products and the mills that produced the yarns and fabrics that provided inputs for these products. However, the most fundamental cause of a lack of profits during the period was chronic excess capacity in the mill products industry. Mill capacity had expanded to meet the increased demand needs of the World War I period, and this expansion was still in place in the national industry in the face of significantly less post-War demand. Material and energy costs were outside the control of the mills, as were transportation costs, determined by market prices. Thus, faced with excess capacity and shrinking markets in an industry that mirrors an economic model of perfect completion during the 1920s, cotton textile mill survival was dependent on the factors of production over which the mill had some control. These included labor productivity, wage rates and the resulting product unit costs associated with these factors. Thus, in order for the mills to have economic survival in the 1920s and 1930s, they were forced to persuade, cajole, or coerce workers to accept larger work-loads and/or to work more intensively, and to produce more with less. The term given to the strategy of requiring workers to produce more with less was called the "stretch-out" and was a key to economic survival.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s labor unions saw an opportunity to take advantage of the poor economic conditions in North Carolina and its cotton textile industry. In the summer of 1929, textile

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unions were busy in Marion, North Carolina trying to organize a number of its mills, including Marion Manufacturing Company. Lawing's² work *The Marion Massacre* is the definitive account of the 1929 labor troubles at Marion Manufacturing Company. While working conditions were similar at Marion Manufacturing and other mills around Marion, the conditions at Marion Manufacturing in terms of tension between management and labor were considered to be ripe for potential success in organizing the workers. Unfortunately, those Marion Manufacturing employees most involved with the attempted unionization of the mill were highly motivated by emotion and did not have a real grasp of the potential economic consequences of their actions. From economic theory, one understands that the monopoly power derived from a labor union might be useful in developing a "balance of power" when dealing with an employer with market power. However, these same unions, when dealing with employers that had little-to-no market power in a near perfectly competitive market, as was faced by Marion Manufacturing, could only generate a lose-lose end result. In this case, successful unionization likely means that, not only are capital owners forced to move their capital to alternative uses, but in the process, the mill shuts down and the workers lose their jobs. Educated union organizers of cotton textile mills of the 1920s and 1930s understood this economic basic and, strategically, union organization goals were more about reducing the long-term power of political "right-to-work" laws in the south than the economic betterment of the cotton mill workers. Marion's local business men had infused a great amount of their own and other people's money in the local mills and had no intention of letting unions use disgruntled workers to do further damage to their already profit-poor investments. The town and mill fight against union organization of Marion Manufacturing received significant national attention. The future president of the University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham, and playwright Paul Green came from Chapel

Hill to give speeches in support of unions. These "educators" were joined by women from Smith College in Massachusetts who came to Marion in support of unions. Union sympathizers across the nation sent money in support of unions. In addition, in October, 1929, American writer Sinclair Lewis came to Marion to report on the labor unrest at Marion Manufacturing Company. The mill conditions he reported on were discomfoting to his northern and midwestern readers who did not understand the economic struggles of the American south. According to the Federal Council of Churches, living and working conditions in Marion's mills and mill villages were considered "unbelievable." Yet these conditions seemed perfectly normal to many poor farmers who had relatives working in cotton mills and who were considering making themselves available for mill employment in hopes of improving their own circumstances. Over the long-run, most of the workers at Marion Manufacturing Company were reluctant to accept unions as the solution to their problems. In general, most of the mill village families considered their quality of life substantially better than the one from which they had come. Most of the employees and their families considered their lives to be comparatively comfortable. The mill had provided a new YMCA that offered leisure time facilities that were superior to any in the town of Marion. A number of mill employees had the ability to purchase cars, trucks, and other consumer goods. Working in the cotton mill was considered easier work than running a mountain farm. While some may have considered their quality of life as "unbelievable", most mill workers didn't consider their conditions to be so bad. In the end, the combination of private and public opposition was enough to defeat the attempt to organize cotton textile labor in Marion, North Carolina, during later attempts in the 1930s. The Great Depression had begun in late 1929 and anyone who had a job was glad to do whatever was required to keep it.

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Post World War II Textile and Apparel Supply Chains; 1950s and 60s

The American textile and apparel supply chains that contributed massive amounts of product to the Allies victory during World War II found themselves undamaged by the War, even as most of the world's economies lay in ruin. In the absence of significant global competition the US Government adopted the economic policy of "full employment." The Employment Act of 1946 passed the US Congress by an overwhelming majority and placed the US Government in a policy role of maximizing employment in the United States. Given the economic trade-off relationships between, inflation, technology, and national employment levels, the US Government made its top priority keeping the US work force employed. This policy had a profound effect on the textile mills of the nation, as well as on its states and mill towns. It allowed the mills to maintain profitability during the 1950s and 1960s in the face of some significant structural problems that would eventually have to be addressed. In fact, the policy postponed addressing these problems until the 1970s and 1980s.

Within the environment of the 1950s and 1960s, the US textile and apparel industry was composed of thousands of small, under-capitalized firms using labor-intensive processes. Independent mills such as Cross Mills, Clinchfield Mills, and Marion Manufacturing Company, all in Marion, North Carolina, produced yarns and fabrics as inputs for other independent mills, those in turn produced yarns and fabrics for other independent mills, that in turn produced processed fabrics that were used by other independent mills to produce final products for apparel, home furnishings and/or industrial uses. This process continued to be coordinated by agents that worked with each other to make products happen. In general the market structure of the industry remained similar to that of pre-World War II. The post- War emphasis on keeping people employed allowed mills and

mill towns to maintain the pre-War status quo during the 1950s and 1960s post-War era. While some degree of vertical integration did exist within the textile products industry during the 1950s and 1960s, by the mid 1970s about seventy percent of all US textile and apparel production market share was controlled by thousands of independent mills dealing with each other in a dynamic manner to form short-term, ad hoc, supply chains directed by agent groups. These supply chains were neither efficient nor effective. However, given the national interest in keeping people employed and maintaining the status-quo in the industry, these chain structures were accepted practice for doing business. In the Post-World War II environment world-wide and domestic demand for US textile and apparel products was high, supply was limited and supply chain optimization was not on the front burner of US textile, apparel and other production/distribution firms. Thoughts of supply chain optimization for the U.S. textile and apparel industries would not become serious until expanding foreign competition forced the issue in the 1970s. Indeed, the 1950s and 1960s were considered good times for mill towns such as those in Marion, North Carolina and Browning's⁴ Easley, South Carolina.

The Burlington Industries - Milliken and Company Strategy of the 1970s and 1980s

During the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. Government began to assume that its domestic economy had reached a point in development such that further subsidization and lack of environmental regulation of U.S. textile and apparel production in its various forms was no longer of prime national interest. As the U.S. textile and apparel industries entered the 1970s and 1980s, its supply chain structures were not adequate to survive the coming global economy. Hundreds of undercapitalized mills in mill towns like Marion, North Carolina, and Easley, South Carolina, were ill equipped to meet the new government standards

regulating cotton dust, noise, waste effluents, product flammability, etc. among other personal and environmental social costs. The mills were also not equipped to meet the rising energy costs of the 1970s and 80s. The agent-controlled industry structure of the past was non-optimal in meeting the growing demand for ever increasing product mixes of customized products of short life cycle that were being generated by new textile materials and the technologies required to process these materials. The new world of textile product production could not tolerate the long lead times and massive amounts of inventories associated with the supply chain organizations of the past.

By the mid 1970s it was well understood by a wide range of U.S. government, education and business officials that the survival of the domestic U.S. textile industry into the 21st century was going to be more than problematic. It was further understood that sooner or later there would be a significant destabilizing effect on America's mill towns as the textile industry adjusted to the new realities of an increasingly global economy. While most of the mills in Marion, North Carolina limped through the 1980s into the early 1990s, and Browning's⁴ Easley, South Carolina mill survived until January, 1990, for most of the Piedmont Carolina's mills and mill towns, the handwriting was on the wall. The coming structural changes of the U.S. textile industry generated a significant amount of national interest and discussion. The interested parties included the National Science Foundation, the Treasury Department's Office of Industrial Economics, U.S. Departments of Commerce and Labor, etc. The presence of textile industry associations such as American Textile Manufacturing Institute (ATMI) and others was pervasive at meetings to discuss the industry's future. Business leaders gave widely diverse opinions about what was required to promote future U.S. textile industry survival. Textile schools such as the one at N.C. State University, serving an

international student clientele, were poised to do scholarly things to aid the textile industry survival process. In a National Science Foundation sponsored report¹⁶, the investigators pointed to the supply chain structure as the key issue of weakness facing the competitive ability of the future U.S. textile industry.

In the mid 1970s, a few U.S. textile firms began to implement a survival strategy for the future. These well-capitalized firms sought to beat the survival odds through the efficient and timely adoption of technology and radically different supply chain designs. These firms bet their future on a belief that the proper utilization of chemical, mechanical and information technology, in concert with a number of horizontally connected vertical supply chains optimized for customer value, would allow long-term survival for a small number of well structured, capital intensive textile and apparel firms. By the mid-to-late 1970s two large textile firms, Burlington Industries and Milliken and Company, had obtained a dominant position in the industry with this strategy. Cooper's paper¹⁷ presents the Burlington Industries view of supply chain strategy of the time. Writing in 1976 for the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Industrial Economics, Hudak and Bohoslav¹⁸ reported that these two firms, Burlington Industries and Milliken and Company, had been able to capitalize on the emerging new technologies associated with textile machinery and man-made fibers, using state of the art computer-based systems, to gain a significant competitive advantage over other U.S. and international textile firms. They pointed to the firms' complex vertical and/or horizontal supply structures that had allowed for significant gains in flexibility, diversification and financial strength. Their study pointed to the fact that after a period of acquiring control of many small mill town mills and absorbing these mills into their supply chain structure, these capital intensive supply chain structures were able to apply mass-customization production and information-

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based techniques in consolidating diverse textile supply chain activities across multiple product lines into well integrated and optimally controlled, profitable operations. The Burlington Industries/Milliken and Company experiment was based in the belief that the natural, *laissez faire*, state of textile and apparel production/distribution did not have to be labor intensive and of an agent-based *ad hoc* supply chain design of the past. The strategy was to develop a supply chain of capital, materials and information intensive business with controlled flexibility. Here, Burlington and Milliken were betting that their horizontal connections of optimized, vertically integrated, single ownership supply chain designs, coupled with the most productive production and distribution technology available, would be superior to any alternative competitive supply chains, domestic or foreign, that could be cobbled together in the 21st Century.

For a number of complicated geopolitical and economic reasons the Burlington/Milliken strategy was not successful. The reasons for this lack of success are beyond the scope of this paper and are covered in Cooper³. However, even if successful, the application of the Burlington and Milliken strategies would have further contributed to the decline of the mill village. For example, when the old Clinchfield mill in Marion, North Carolina and its mill village became a part of Burlington Industries in the 1970s, a new production facility was built to house the most modern production technology in a clean, worker-friendly environment where skilled employees were commuting to work from their non mill village homes in their automobiles.

The Decline of the Mill Village

Starting in the 1930s, but accelerating after World War II, textile firms sold off their company-owned housing. The dissolution of this important institution represented a major break from traditional

mill policy. As the textile industry evolved in technology and labor requirements and as mills faced increasing competitive labor supply markets, the traditional mill village began to outgrow its usefulness and no longer served the best interests of the firm. By the 1950s and 1960s, transportation improvements allowed workers to live at greater distances from the mill, growth in the industry had slowed, and the provision of company owned housing was no longer deemed necessary for labor recruitment. Mill vacancies were increasingly filled by experienced workers in the region rather than from novice workers transferred from the farm sector as had been the case in the past. The monopoly effects of the mill village system dissipated as more housing alternatives opened to potential mill workers and the market for mill labor became more individual rather than family oriented. In general, the balance of the benefits and costs of mill owned housing began to fall on the side of the mills disposing of their mill houses. Textile mill workers and others spoke to the symptoms but not the central causes of the decline of the mill village. Grooms¹⁹ quotes Lois Yandle, a former cotton mill worker, who spoke to the decline of the mill village in her book²⁰ when she said,

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“What really changed things was the war—when a lot of younger people who’d gone into the service came back they didn’t want to go into the mills. They’d seen other things, different things.”

Grooms¹⁹ also quotes Walt Stafford a former Chadwick Mill employee when he said,

“After they sold the houses, people felt better because they owned their own homes for a change. But then they closed the community centers, they quit playing ball, things like that, things just changed and people didn’t seem as willing to help out a neighbor as before, and the whole thing just went downhill. It’s how I grew up so I miss it, but I’ve had a pretty good life and at least I can remember how it was back then.”

Browning⁴ comes close to the heart of the issue when he speaks to the end of mill village life and the eventual closing of the mill of his family.

“The major change could have been the sale of the company-owned houses and, indeed, that was an important point in the evolution of mill hill life. There came with that development self-sufficiency pleasing to the proud people of the mill hills, most of whom had never owned either an automobile or a home of their own. By the late 1950s, most of them had both and nothing ever again could be the same.”

“Long ago the company had built the houses in a successful effort to attract its work force, mostly from the dirt farms of the South. But by the time we were well into the cold war of the 1950s, good times had set in and the work force was becoming more mobile. The company’s reason for owning houses to rent to its workers no longer existed.”

“But the mill didn’t begin changing with the coming of the ‘90s, or even with the ‘80s or ‘70s. We know now that it was changing even as we were living in harmony with the humming of spinning frames and the rattle of the weave room.”

Here, Browning seems to recognize that the selling of the mill houses was a symptom of some more central issue that was in play even as he himself was enjoying “good times” in his mill village.

The core issue here was the economic survival of the mill. In truth, the established pre-World War II textile mill structure was living on borrowed time in the 1950s and 1960s. It was only a matter of time until the U.S. full employment labor support policies of 1946 would give way to new directions, and the existing textile mill structure of the Piedmont Carolinas would be required to be on its own. The challenges and opportunities presented by the new materials, new technologies, and new government restrictions of the 1970s and 1980s would have to be faced by mill

ownership. Large amounts of new investment capital would be required for existing textile mills to survive. Cooper³ points out that the great majority of textile companies in the mid twentieth century relied on internally generated funds for capital expenditures, which were in turn dependent upon, in some cases, less than marginal retained earnings. In the 1970s, the American Textile Manufacturing Institute (ATMI) concluded that in many cases, textile firms’ retained earnings could not even cover working capital needs, let alone investments in fixed expenditures. One source of cost reduction and capital for investment was associated with the sale of mill houses. However, for the typical textile firm, the sale of its mill houses could only postpone the inevitable closing of the mill. Some saw the sale of mill houses for what it was, a symptom of an underlying economic cancer. Others failed to put the two-plus-two together and hung around. Browning⁴ speaks to the fact that it was his generation to be the first, in significant numbers, “to flee the spinning rooms and weave rooms of our parents and grandparents for other lifetime vocations.” As he watched the closing of the Easley Mill he wonders, if he had not left the mill, “Where would a 52-year old doffer find a market for the skills he had polished for more than 30 years?”⁴

Unification of Town-Mill Village Attitudes

Much has been written about the interaction between residents of mill towns and surrounding mill villages. Tannenbaum’s²¹ general view of town-mill village interaction in 1924 was expressed as:

“...mill population is a world apart. It does not play with the community. It does not mix with it. It does not intermarry, it does not work with it. The children do not play baseball together, and in one instance an attempt to establish a common camp had to be given up on account of opposition to having the other children associate with the mill children. This is so general a fact in the

mill section of the South that it is recognized as a caste system. The mill people are at the bottom of the scale.”

Grooms¹⁹ quotes Yandle who spoke as a mill employee that:

“...everyone who grew up there had an inferiority complex because we knew that so many people who lived in other sections of town looked down on mill workers. We were all aware of that, but we still thought we were as good as anybody else – that was part of the spirit of those mill villages, a certain pride.” “We were poor but we didn’t think that much about it, we just made the best of it. And that’s just how we were.”

Grooms¹⁹ points out that most mill workers stayed within their own mill villages. One mill employee is quoted as saying, “However, on occasion, with some trepidation they may make their way into the town to patronize stores of wealthier suburbanites.” It was perceived that mill workers were often looked down on by the townspeople. Some town stores even had a special days reserved for mill workers to shop downtown, apart from the rest of their customers. Grooms¹⁹ quotes a Lewis “Skinny” Minus who said,

“You more or less stayed where you lived. We didn’t go to say Myers Park; we had no business over there just like they didn’t have any business over here. Some people looked down their noses at cotton mill people, but we didn’t let it bother us, really we were a proud people.”

In the 1950s my high school, Marion High School, located in down-town Marion, North Carolina, became a melting pot of mill kids and town kids. While I knew some mill kids before high school from our joint love of the Marion Marauders minor league baseball team, my introduction to mill kids as a group was as a freshman when I discovered that most of the best basketball, football, and baseball players were from the mill villages. Since I was interested in playing all those sports, this was an important discovery. I discovered that most

mill kids did not have the background to join the high school band but did dominate the high school chorus. In addition, many mill kids did join the high school clubs and service organizations to the extent that the casual observer would have a hard time differentiating the mill kids from the town kids. There was significant interaction. However, from time to time there was a tension. In retrospect, I believe the tension was more about the parents and less about the kids.

My first and last formal dates in high school were with the same mill village girl. On our first date I walked to the mill village, found her house, and met her parents. We walked to the movie, got popcorn and a Coke, saw the movie, then, walked back to her house. She was a very attractive girl who I would have wanted to continue to date except for an “attitude” I received from my town friends after the date. Peer pressure from my town-kid friends, while not strongly overt, was enough to make me believe that I should confine my dating to town-girls. As a novice freshman in high school, who was unsure of the proper social rule relative to such matters, I complied. It is to my credit that by my sophomore year, I had decided to date mill girls, whenever there was a mutual agreement between me and her. Although I felt the town/village tension with respect to boy-girl dating, I felt no tension at all in boy-boy relation ties with mill kids. Many of my best friends were the mill kids I played basketball, football and baseball with. I was welcome in their mill village houses and because of our bond with sport, I felt accepted in their mill village environment. For my generation, the social barriers between town and mill village were becoming more flexible but were not yet gone.

While high school football and basketball teams became unifying forces drawing together the people of the town and the mill villages, so were the various baseball teams that were a part of the many mill towns of the Piedmont Carolinas. Prominent in mill towns were the industrial

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league teams. During the more isolation years of the 1920s and 1930s, individual mills had teams with their employees as players. These teams not only provided entertainment for the mill employees of the mill village but also served as a device to bond the mill employees in a sense of community. Mill workers would turn out by the hundreds to watch their company's team take on a rival mill in their mill town or in a nearby town. During this time it was a common practice for a mill to hire talented baseball players who did light work in the mill between their "real job" of playing baseball for the mill.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s these individual mill teams began to consolidate into mill town teams. Mill towns like Marion, Gastonia, Shelby and Lincolnton, all in North Carolina, each had professional minor league teams. Some of these teams were associated with major league player development while others were independently owned and staffed with former and current mill players of the region. It was not uncommon to have older, former major league players as a part of these teams. In the late 1940s and early 1950s these consolidated mill town teams were an important source of town-mill village unity as both town people and mill people could develop a common sense of community of town versus town as compared to mill versus mill. Wilt Browning, so often referenced in this paper for his memoir about life in Easley, SC, also wrote a book *The Rocks; the True Story of the Worst Team in Baseball History*²² that has as its focus one of these mill town teams and the professional minor league teams it played. One of the highlights of the book is the night that the Granite Falls Rocks defeated the Marion Marauders. I remember attending that game as a youth, and in retrospect I remember that in addition to doctors, lawyers, mill executives and merchants, I was surrounded by mill workers from all of Marion's mill villages. Here was a common bond in support of our town's team.

While the social barriers between town and mill village were becoming more flexible for my generation, they were hard to overcome. This seemed to be the case for Browning⁴ when upon deciding to follow a career as a writer, his mother accused him of considering himself too good to follow in the footsteps of his parents and work in the mill. In telling this story Browning sees himself as being a part of a larger movement, a movement to break the chain of mill work. His was the generation that broke the chain, and Browning and I were of the same generation, just on different sides of the chain. While Browning was being successful as a sports writer, I was doing my part trying to hold the textile industry together. My first try was as a textile college professor teaching the capabilities of the new technology-based supply chain management. My second try was as an operations vice president for three different textile firms. Here, I had the honor of being on the wrong side of two leverage buy-outs in five years, 1980-85. In his book⁴ when Browning asked "What does a 50-year old spinner or weaver do when there is no more spinning or weaving to be done?" I counter with the question, "What does a 50-year old operations vice president do when there is no more spinning or weaving to be done?" The death of the textile industries not only took down many mill-kids but town-kid vice presidents as well!

Conclusion

At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, much of the textile industry of the Carolinas literally picked up its machines and moved to Asia and other regions of the world. This exodus left a good number of the mill towns of the Piedmont Carolinas, like Marion, North Carolina, a mere shadow of their once thriving selves. Those of us who remember the towns otherwise have watched empty buildings, deserted streets, and a sense of displacement become the rule rather than the exception. What did this one-hundred year mill town life cycle leave behind? Some of the former mill towns have been able to

adapt and prosper while others have not. The case is often made that the cotton textile industry with the associated mill villages served as a magnet for economic development of the associated mill town both during and after the decline of textile production. Grooms¹⁹ quotes a UNC Charlotte history professor, Dan Morrill, on this point relative to the development of Charlotte, North Carolina. Dr. Morrill said,

“Textile workers generated the money that made this city rich and powerful. It’s that simple. I don’t think the mill village people got the recognition at the time for being the basis of the wealth of the new South and they don’t get the recognition today.”

This view is supported in the same article by Bren Martin, curator of the *Thread of Change, Life in a Cotton Mill Village* exhibit at the Museum of the New South in Charlotte North Carolina:

“The textile industry was the major catalyst for the growth of this region. It touched almost every aspect of life in the area. Charlotte is now a major financial center because it was also a textile service center.”
*“As the industry grew, a lot of the owners, including those from surrounding areas, pooled their resources – support industries and their financial dealings, etc. and it led to the growth of the city as a financial hub.”*¹⁹

For over one hundred years the mills provided commercial opportunities for the production and distribution of things and services. In addition land developers were busy developing suburbs to accommodate the lawyers, doctors, bankers, transportation and energy workers, merchants and other commercial enterprises associated with the town area of a typical mill town. Thus, with the coming of improved roads connecting mill towns in the 1920s, by the 1920s and 1930s the Carolina Piedmont was dotted with any number of mill towns that contained one or more mill villages and a supporting commercial town at the hub. This was the case for Browning’s Easley, South Carolina and for Cooper’s Marion, North

Carolina. Thus, it is fair to point to a symbiotic relationship between mill village and mill town that existed for most of the twentieth century in the Piedmont Carolinas where the fate of the town and its mills were heavily dependent one on the other.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century one can see a concentration of population around many of the former mill towns along the I-85 and I-40 corridors of the Piedmont Carolinas. In addition to Charlotte, cities such as Burlington and Greensboro, North Carolina and Spartanburg and Greenville, South Carolina have been able to survive the loss of textile production and prosper as independent cities. The use of old mill buildings for new commerce, as well as the old unused buildings left standing are a reminder of what was called a “mill town.”

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