

# Life in the mill villages

BY JAMES LELOUDIS AND KATHRYN WALBERT

From *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (see <http://www.ibiblio.org/sohp/laf/index.html>).

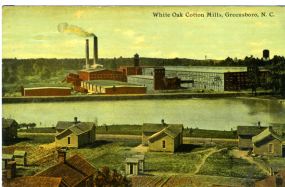


Figure 1. This early twentieth-century postcard shows the White Oak Cotton Mills in Greensboro and several mill village houses.

By 1900, a full 92 percent of textile workers lived in mill villages owned by the companies that employed them. Usually, the mill village included a supervisor's home, houses for workers and their families, one or more churches, a school, and the company store. In the early 1900s, most mill houses were one-story, four-room affairs, lit by kerosene lamps and heated by open fireplaces. Workers drew water from common wells and pumps, and less than 7 percent of mills in 1907-1908 had sewer facilities more elaborate than simple privies. Many manufacturers had a rule that required families to supply one worker for each room occupied, further encouraging the entry of children into the mills.

The closeness to the factory had its advantages for millhands, but it also meant that mill managers could keep close tabs on their employees, sometimes using supervisors or mill village policemen for surveillance. Mills often supported the churches in the villages, paying the salaries of ministers or providing maintenance and heat for the buildings, and, in turn, the donations from mill owners frequently shaped the message from the pulpit. Not surprisingly, some company-supported pastors preached a gospel that favored the company's interests.

Mills also sponsored village schools, sometimes providing buildings and paying teachers' salaries. Supervisors would often send for children in the school when extra workers were needed in the mill. "Owners had little to gain by enforcing school attendance, since children who became ensnared by the factory at an early age were less likely to seek employment elsewhere as adults. These conditions improved only in the mid-1910s after schooling was made mandatory for all children under twelve years of age. By 1925 North Carolina's mill schools enrolled an average of 79 percent of all thirteen-year-olds, as compared to 83 percent for rural schools and 88 percent for city schools." (p. 128) Most mills provided the first seven grades of education free of charge, but workers would often have to pay for any schooling beyond that, meaning that most children went straight from the seventh grade into mill work.

Mills operated company stores and often sponsored a variety of other small businesses such as barber shops and pool halls. Those establishments were a convenience to workers, but they could also serve to keep millhands in debt to their employers. Mills also provided

social workers, recreational activities, clubs, and educational opportunities, in part to provide better living conditions to their employees, but also to make sure that, in a time of labor shortage, millhands were satisfied enough that they would not seek employment elsewhere. Mill owners also hoped that the benefits they supplied to employees would silence critics from outside the mills who worried about poor working and living conditions, child labor, and mill village poverty. The results, however, were often disappointing. For their part, mill workers recognized that the sewing clubs, nurseries, and baseball teams offered by the companies were intended to keep them docile and loyal. Some workers refused to participate or created their own recreational activities as alternatives to company-sponsored options. Still others took part in the programs but did not buy into the company's intended message. They demanded higher pay and better conditions even as they took full advantage of the clubs and other activities.

Company “welfare work” failed to produce dramatic results because workers drew on the strengths of their own communities to avoid dependence on their employers. Millhands brought remnants of their lives on the farm with them and insisted on having gardens, barns for their animals, and chicken coops in the villages. They socialized together, often gathering for music and dancing, and helped their neighbors during difficult times, just as many had done in rural communities. Mill workers also created their own alternative churches and held emotional revivals that worried many mill owners.

“Viewed from the outside, mill villages seemed to deny workers the most basic forms of self-expression. But in muddy streets and cramped cottages cotton mill people managed to shape a way of life beyond their employers’ grasp. Millhands’ habits and beliefs were more than remnants of a rural past; they were instruments of power and protection, survival and self-respect, molded into a distinctive mill village culture. Sometimes that culture simply defended workers against condescension and economic hardship. At other times, it bred a spirit of independence that threatened the village’s purpose as an institution of labor control. In either case, it offered assurance that mill folks were ‘fine, honest, hard-working people.’”

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James Leloudis is Associate Professor of History, Associate Dean for Honors, and Director of the James M. Johnston Center for Undergraduate Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Professor Leloudis' chief interest is the history of the modern South, with emphases on women, labor, education, race, and reform. He has published two books on these topics: *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (co-authored with Jacquelyn Hall, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher Daly), and *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and*

*Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920*. He currently has two new projects underway. The first is a study of race, politics, and leadership in the War on Poverty in the South. This work focuses on the North Carolina Fund, one of the most innovative state-level anti-poverty programs of the 1960s, and is based largely on oral history interviews with the Fund's staff, clients, and student volunteers. The second project is an oral history study of school desegregation.

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Kathryn Walbert holds a Ph.D. in United States History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She directs LEARN NC's efforts to develop instructor-led and self-guided materials for professional development in a range of topics in United States and North Carolina history. She has developed and taught online courses on "The Civil Rights Movement in Context" and "North Carolina American Indians." She is also the author of several articles for LEARN NC, including a series on using oral history in the K-12 classroom and "Beyond Black History Month."

A long-time associate of the Southern Oral History Program, Walbert has been using oral history in her own research and training others in the craft for over ten years. Her doctoral research focused on Southern women, both black and white, who became teachers after the Civil War, and the role of teaching in shaping their identities. From 2001 to 2003, she was an academic skills instructor at Duke University. She now serves as a consultant on U.S. history, oral history, and academic skills to LEARN NC and other organizations.

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#### **Figure 1 (page 1)**

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